Tokyo Ravens Volume1

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Kouhei Azano

あざの耕平

世界一初恋

SHAMAN*CLAN

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東京レイヴンズ1
SHAMAN*CLAN

あざの耕平

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東京レイヴンズ1
SHAMAN*CLAN

『ぼく、シキガミになる。ずっと一緒にいて、ずっと護ってあげる』

それは遠い昔の約束。彼がまだ〝将来〟の意味を知る前の――。

霊的災害〈霊災〉が多発し、陰陽師（レイヴンズ）たちが活躍する現代。

土御門春虎（つちみかどはるとら）はトコトン運の悪い少年だった。陰陽師の名門に生まれながら、才能はからっきし。この16年の人生で、死にかけた回数12回。そしてある夏の日、極めつきの受難が、彼の前に訪れる。

「久しぶりです――春虎君」

土御門家次代当主である幼なじみの少女、夏目（なつめ）。彼女との再会が、春虎をかつて見た〝将来〟へ――波乱に充ちた〝未来〟へと導き始める！　闇に舞う鴉（レイヴンズ）たちの、時を超える陰×陽ファンタジー!!

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あざの耕平
●あざのこうへい

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カバーデザイン：伸童舎

東京巫師公寓

SHAMAN*CLAN 1

「これであなたは、私の式神です――」

「祭祀を始めるつもりです。止めなければ！」

荷駄で運びやがな――しかし、どこかバランスを欠いた、あれが十二神将の一人、『神童』なのだ――独特の霊気。

「春虎。ぼくは、君が、好き」

——抱きしめている腕の中の感触が、希薄なものに変わっていく——

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「これはゾンビですか？」
第20回受賞 木村心一
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Chapter 1 - The Son of the Branch Family

"Do you know what the essence of sorcery is?"

"The answer is 'lies'."

-Tsuchimikado Yakou.

Part 1

It was an incident that happened many years ago.

When the adult relatives gathered for an occasion, Harutora and Natsume would often play with each other .

The playful Harutora would often get hurt, but Natsume, the princess of the main family, was very modest and docile. She was scared of meeting strangers and had few friends. Thus, whenever Harutora came by, her face would flush with excitement. She would listen to whatever Harutora would say and would follow him wherever he went.

The place they played at was the courtyard inside the main family mansion.

There was a bamboo forest in this wide garden, a lake, some stone lanterns, some fake hills, moss, little insects, shrines and so on. It was filled with delight and adventure.

But during one time, when they were playing, Natsume was suddenly frightened as she hid behind Harutora. She would give a crying look when they were playing tag or hide and seek, and she would hug Harutora tightly as she said,

"I think there’s something,

Looking right at me."

Harutora could not see anything.

At first, he thought that Natsume was being too scared , called her a scaredy-cat, a crybaby, and even told her off .

Just go back to the adults if you’re so scared. I can play on my own.

Because of Harutora, Natsume almost ended up crying . However, she did not do so, but managed to endure, forcing a smile as she continued to play with Harutora.

But when Harutora heard from his parents that Natsume was ‘a child who could see’, he knew he was wrong.

Natsume was not scared, but saw something Harutora did not see.

"Sorry."

Natsume’s eyes widened when she saw Harutora lower his head in apology. Harutora continued to insist that he was to blame and apologized saying that it was his fault.

I can’t see anything that scares me, and whatever I can’ t see can’t scare me.

Thus, when you’re scared, I’ll definitely protect you, Natsume.

And so, Natsume suddenly mumbled some words to herself, and then gave Harutora an expectant look.

Can you become my shikigami?

At that time, Harutora did not understand the meaning behind her words. What's a shikigami? He asked, and Natsume shook her head, saying, I don't know. Granny said that a shikigami would protect me, you will become my shikigami as part of our family's ' tradition', Harutora, and you will stay by me and protect me.

But Harutora still did not understand.

What is this 'tradition'?

It's decided between my family and your family, Harutora.

Is that so? Why didn't I hear of it?

But it was determined as such.

Natsume answered with a forced tone, feeling like her most valuable incantations had been treated with disdain , and Harutora felt embarrassed by it. Natsume then showed an insecure look the moment she saw Harutora's expression.

Will you not…become my shikigami?

Her voice was trembling, and Harutora panicked, thinking he had made her cry again.

However, Natsume was not crying. She was restless, scared, and her eyes looked like they were about to cry, but Harutora saw that those eyes were not wavering. Those eyes looked like they were a lake surface on a mountain in the clouds, showing only the reflection of the skies and space. There was a strong-willed determination of a kind Harutora did not know of.

He seemed attracted by Natsume's eyes. It's fine, he answered.

Okay, I'll become your shikigami, Natsume. I'll always stay by you and protect you.

Natsume raised her right hand and extended her little finger. Harutora too reached his right hand out and used his own little finger to hook onto Natsume's finger.

Natsume started to chant, and looked so serious it was scary. Harutora too followed, and their voices formed a promise.

Once she released her hand, Natsume looked like she won the biggest lottery in life as she showed a radiant smile. Harutora saw that dazzling smile and thought that they finally made up.

But why was I not smiling as brightly as Natsume? His mind was thinking that this was good, but there was a part in his heart where he just could not calm down. It felt like he swallowed a piece of candy that was as large as a fist.

It felt heavy, painful, but he could not spit it out—

It felt very sweet when he licked it.

After that, both of them continued to play in the mansion's garden like usual. Whenever Natsume looked scared, Harutora would look at the place where there was nothing, swing his fists, yell bravely and pursue the thing only Natsume could see.

No matter what happened, he definitely must not let her get hurt.

—That had been many years ago.

Back then, Harutora still did not understand what the ‘ future’ meant.

Part 2

Miasma had already overflowed into the surroundings when the personnel carrier arrived.

Most of the people in the shopping district had gone to shelters, leaving behind an empty street. Onmyouji wearing clothing that protected them from miasma came out from the carriage that had pulled an emergency stop.

The source of the spiritual disaster was an ancient tree growing in the middle of the shopping district. The big tree gave off an abnormal spiritual pressure, twisting its trunk as if it were an animal.

Aura - something that filled every creature.

That aura would often oscillate and waver, maintaining a stable state throughout the whole body.

But, occasionally the oscillation would go out of control, and the clearly imbalanced aura would become miasma, further skewing the imbalance.

An accident where the aura was unable to recover, where it far exceeded the acceptable range for self-purification - those were the spiritual disasters recognized by those versed in Onmyoudou. And driving out the spirit - 'Exorcism' - was the duty of the Onmyouji, members of the Onmyou Agency.

Like a group of ravens dancing in the Tokyo night, they encircled the ancient tree, drawing out small daggers from their pockets one by one.

They chanted the incantation, thrusting their daggers down towards the asphalt road. The daggers filled with magical energy pierced the road, sticking into it. White light flashed off of the blades, spreading along the ground, encircling the ancient tree, forming a nimbus of light, cutting off the source of the spiritual disaster from the outside world, and creating a barrier.

The ancient tree didn't stop moving from this. It continued spewing out miasmas as if spraying out spores , and the branches struggled to resist the force, as if it wanted to break the barrier.

The spiritual disaster had already reached the second phase, and the situation didn't allow for the Onmyouji to take it lightly. If this went on, it would soon enter phase three, and the miasma would take form, birthing ' demons'.

Just then...

"Sorry, I've made you all wait!"

A motorcycle approached from behind the Onmyouji who were maintaining the barrier.

A sharp-eyed man sprinted swiftly from the motorcycle.

He wasn't wearing the miasma-protection clothing of the Onmyouji, but instead wore a colorful shirt and a pair of jeans with holes in the knees, looking completely unlike an Onmyouji.

But, he was the commander leading this group, the top of the country's Onmyouji - one of the National First-Class Onmyouji.

"I've finally caught up. I'll get rid of this demon in one strike, you guys stay sharp and maintain the barrier!"

The man wore a katana on his waist. He dismounted from the motorcycle, rushing forward and drawing the katana.

He slashed the blade through the air, drawing a complex pattern. He manipulated aura, converting it to magical force, and the blade shone with a blinding light as if it were engulfed in flame.

The commander of the ravens chanted:

"By the five elements, keen spirit of metal, cut down the spirit of wood! Metal overcomes wood! Disperse, demonic miasma!"

The raised sword cleaved towards the ancient tree--

"Wow, awesome!"

Tsuchimikado Harutora slurped noodles with disposable chopsticks, staring intently at the television screen.

He was sitting in a small udon shop with an atmosphere reminiscent of the old Showa era. The windows of the shop were open wide, and the old electric fan circulated the cool air, blowing away the summer heat.

The television screen was currently live-broadcasting the Onmyouji eliminating the spiritual disaster. Since almost all spiritual disasters happened inside Tokyo, it was an almost foreign scene to Harutora who lived in this kind of countryside place.

Harutora pointed his chopsticks at the television in the shop.

"Look, Touji. That tree's at least two meters in diameter , but it was cut down instantly, almost like a manga."

He was full of excitement as he spoke to Ato Touji who sat across from him.

Touji had finished eating long ago, slumped lazily in his seat. He listened to Harutora's words, turning his head to look at the television behind him. The fierce pair of eyes cast a bored gaze from under the bandanna around his forehead.

".....After all, elites like Onmyouji aren't too different from manga in the first place."

"Elites?"

"The ones who qualify through the 'First-Class Onmyou Exam', also known as the National First-Class Onmyouji..... Wasn't there a special report in that magazine I let you read earlier?"

"Huh? So that katana guy is one of the 'Twelve Divine Generals'? Amazing!"

Harutora moved his gaze to the television again. The live-streamed broadcast had switched to a reporter making a statement on the scene, and Harutora still stared happily at the television, only remembering that he was still eating after a while, and then continuing to eat his noodles.

Generally speaking, being an Onmyouji was quite a peculiar profession.

But once one became a National First-Class Onmyouji, it was a completely different position.

The so-called 'Twelve Divine Generals' was just a title bestowed upon them by the media, since there were only a dozen National First-Class Onmyouji who had passed the First-Class Onmyou Exam. It could be said that these were even more extraordinary elite Onmyouji.

"These kinds of broadcasts are becoming more common recently." Harutora slurped udon as he spoke.

"Seems like spiritual disasters are on an increasing trend..... But, that's all Tokyo's business." Touji looked out the window.

"This place is very peaceful."

Harutora set down his chopsticks in the middle of eating his udon, looking at Touji.

"What is it, are you thinking of your family after being away for a long time?"

"That's not it, I don't hate the peace."

"Haha, don't lie. When you were in Tokyo you were a violent juvenile delinquent."

"Shut up, go eat your noodles."

Touji narrowed his eyes and creased his brow, and Harutora laughed while reaching his hand towards the small bottle of hot sauce.

Once they walked out of the store, Harutora couldn't

help but narrow his eyes at the dazzling sunlight and the vast expanse of whiteness in front of them.

The August sun was high in the sky, strong heat reflected off the asphalt road, and cicadas chirped in bursts like the crashing of waves.

On the other side of the street was a park full of greenery. Raising his gaze, the blue sky was before him, big white clouds stretching across the sky.

It was summer.

Harutora and Touji walked out of the noodle shop and stood in front of the store for a while.

"......It's so hot."

"Summer, you know."

Their ears could almost hear the sound of their skin being fried as they stood underneath the hot sunlight. When they crossed the road and moved underneath the shade of the trees, they resumed their aimless stroll again .

It was currently summer vacation, and today they had been receiving summer remedial classes for the entire morning, and not until just now on the road home had they dealt with their late lunch.

The two of them wore the uniform of white short-sleeved shirts and gray pants for the remedial class just now, but Touji had a bandanna wrapped around his forehead, keeping back his long hair.

Maybe the atmospheres that the two gave off were different, as even if they were both wearing uniforms, Touji appeared much more handsome. The two of them were like a tiger sticking his tongue out from the heat and a wolf that calmly looked for prey. Touji had grown to be quite handsome in the first place, and of course that could be one of the reasons creating the disparity between the two.

"My mouth is still really spicy."

"You put in too much hot sauce."

"I didn't do it on purpose, it's cause the lid of the bottle fell off."

"Your luck is still as bad as ever."

Touji snickered.

Actually, Harutora's luck was strangely poor, and the lid of the bottle falling off when he was pouring hot sauce even counted as a small matter. For example, he had been in car accidents twelve times. It was really hard to judge whether being run over by cars twelve times but still being alive meant his luck was good or bad.

"This is definitely a curse inherited by my ancestors."

"Well, with your lineage, the probability's pretty high."

As usual, Harutora's complaints didn't stop, and Touji who walked beside him replied sarcastically.

The sunlight passed through the leaves and shone on the asphalt road, as if luminescence had been scattered everywhere. Clearly outlined dark shadows contrasted with the patchy light, and looking at that scene made the heat seem like it had lowered somewhat.

"Alright..... What should we do next?"

Harutora was still muttering. His phone promptly sounded as if it had taken that opportunity,

"Oh." Harutora fished his phone out of his pocket.

He flipped open the folding phone, and after seeing the name displayed on the screen, immediately closed his eyes halfway, closing the phone without saying a word. Then, he put the phone back into his pocket as if nothing had happened.

"......Hokuto?" Touji slanted his gaze towards him, confirming.

"......It was Hokuto."

Harutora didn't explain further, nor did Touji pursue the question.

The two of them listened to the cicadas while strolling leisurely.

"What will we do later? I don't have any money on me, but should we still just go to the arcade to hang out?" Harutora proposed this, his spirits restored.

"......No, unfortunately, you're wasting your effort."

"What? What do you mean?"

"You've already been caught, as expected of your bad luck."

Touji pointed slightly behind Harutora's back.

"You Bakatora!"

A voice that seemed to exemplify vitality sounded with a light, brisk tone.

Then, Harutora heard the sound of footsteps stamping on the asphalt road - and soon after, something warm and soft jumped onto his back.

"I found you! Why didn't you pick up your phone? Hurry up and say it! Bakatora!"

"D, Don't be like that, Hokuto! I can't breathe--! I'm gonna die--!"

Two hands reached out from behind Harutora's back, grabbing his neck. Short, light-colored hair floated lightly in the summer breeze.

Harutora's neck was being throttled vigorously, and he desperately tried to loosen Hokuto's arms. But Hokuto didn't give up the opportunity to deliver the finishing blow, and she raised her arms, grinding them on Harutora's head.

"Bakatora! Bakatora!"

"Hey, stop it. Don't lean on me, it's too hot, you tomboy!"

"What did you say! Harutora's the one who smells like sweat."

"Don't smell me!"

"Ah, there's the smell of soup, did you eat udon again?
"

"Didn't I tell you not to smell other peoples' bodies! Are you a dog!"

Red-faced, Harutora took a big step back. Hokuto finally released him, showing a bright smile, and saying with a youthful tone:

"The weather's so hot, I never expected you to be able to eat udon, your brain really must have gotten fried."

"Be a little less nosy! Also, don't you look down on udon, udon is Japan's profound-"

"Touji, what did you eat?"

"Soba."

"Are you forgetting about me? Or just deliberately ignoring me?"

Harutora roared with intensity, but Hokuto who had him in the palm of her hand seemed at leisure.

He and Hokuto had been like this since junior high up through today. Her eyes were wide, her lips would naturally curve upwards, and her manner of speech was like a boy's, but she had a well-formed, cute face, which seemed extremely unexpected. She wore a tight-fitting polo shirt and a miniskirt, with her hands and feet tanned slightly brown by the sun.

She swung her pretty toned legs back and forth, moving back and forth between the frustrated-looking Harutora and Touji who didn't bother with her.

"You guys went to remedials today, too? As expected of the King of Failing and the Skipping School Master."

"You're noisy, what did you come here to do, anyway?
"

"Hmm? Nothing, I just came here for a walk."

"A walk on this kind of super hot day? Are you the one whose brain got fried?"

"At least it's much more meaningful than remedial classes. Did you know, Harutora? In this world, only clever people prosper."

"Uh, this guy's power of persuasion is truly annoying... ..."

"I'm not a guy, I'm a girl, Bakatora."

"Shut up, you tomboy."

Frustrated, Harutora stared at the dramatizing Hokuto .

Incidentally, 'Bakatora' was Hokuto's original creation, who had described Harutora as 'An old tiger, passing a spring day by sleeping lazily while showing its belly' to belittle him. As the analogy was very apt, she hadn't been able to resist praising her own creativity when she had thought of this nickname, but Harutora just felt furious at its origins.

Touji sighed wordlessly as he watched the two of them bickering as usual.

"Speaking of which, you still have that uncanny intuition like always. Did you also see the broadcast just now?"

"Yeah, and Touji too, you're looking sharp as usual."

"So then, I should go over it again....."[1]

How unbearable. Touji turned to the side, shifting his gaze away. Harutora just looked displeased as if he were a tiger whose head had been shaved.

Hokuto didn't concern herself with the reactions of the two.

"In short! Regardless of why I called out to you guys, Harutora has to pay for ignoring my phone call first. Hurry up, come on!"

After Hokuto straightened her back and delivered this announcement, she grabbed Harutora's hand, pulling him into a run.

Her arm was slim like a girl's, but her strength was surprisingly great. "Hey, what are you doing!" As Hokuto towed Harutora away, he was forced to follow along.

Touji raised an eyebrow, looking quite helpless.

Then, he stuck both hands in his pants pockets, slowly following in the pair's footsteps.

Part 3

".....I really can't understand, why do I have to treat Hokuto to shaved ice? Why, I don't get it at all....."

Ten minutes later.

Harutora sat on a park bench, staring at the shaved ice in a plastic cup, complaining with a displeased tone and look.

In contrast, Hokuto who had received her compensation looked overjoyed.

"You're stupid, Harutora, no wonder you always fail your exams."

"Don't talk nonsense! It's my right to pick up my phone or not, and as for shaved ice--"

"...Yum."

"Hey, don't silently eat someone else's shaved ice! Also , you ate the layer on top, what the hell!"

Harutora roared, moving the cup away from Hokuto. Because Hokuto had eaten too rapidly, she screwed up

her face and rubbed her temple, which could be called a self-inflicted pain.[2]

"......Hokuto, are you here to advise Harutora to be an Onmyouji again?" Touji opened his mouth to ask this as he drank a soda off to the side.

As he said this, Hokuto straightened her back as if responding.

"Harutora."

Hokuto slipped her face in close, staring straight into his eyes. Harutora unconsciously shrank backwards from being stared at by her large eyes.

"W, What?"

"You saw the broadcast on TV right now, right?"

"Y, Yes....."

"Didn't you imagine being like them? Do you want to? You should have, right? It definitely made you think about becoming just like them, right?"

Hokuto's tone was extremely excited.

Harutora had a premonition that the words that had been said more than ten times were going to be repeated, and couldn't help from sighing.

".....I don't want to at all."

"Why? Harutora, you're the descendant of Abe no Seimei, from the Tsuchimikado family of genuine Onmyouji!"

Annoyed, Harutora made a face at Hokuto's aggressive attitude.

Every word Hokuto said was true.

Abe no Seimei had been active during the Heian era, a distinguished Onmyouji of the time. After he died, his sons claimed to be 'Tsuchimikado', genuine Onmyouji, and for a long time dominated the world of Onmyoudou, until the Meiji era. It was needless to say, Harutora - Tsuchimikado Harutora was a descendant of this famous family.

But.

"I told you, Hokuto. I've said this so much I don't even want to say it anymore, though I'm a Tsuchimikado, my family is a 'branch family', completely different from the incredible 'main family'."

"Even so, you're still a Tsuchimikado! You were born in a legitimate family with history since the Heian era! But you go to a mediocre high school, laze around all day , fail your tests and not care, take remedial classes everyday after school, and complain endlessly... Don't you think you're pathetic like that?"

"You don't need to be that nosy....."

Harutora listened to Hokuto speak clearly and logically, but couldn't help from frowning.

Before this, Hokuto had tried to persuade Harutora several times, wanting him to 'Become an Onmyouji'. And every time she saw news about Onmyouji, it would intensify. She always said the same things about him being born in a famous family, and her style of convincing could be said to be enthusiastic, but was closer to stubborn.

"Since you were born in a famous family, don't you have an obligation?"

"Not at all, what era are you from?"

"Harutora, you're too irresponsible!"

"What do you mean responsible or irresponsible, I just happened to be born in the Tsuchimikado branch family, I'm just an ordinary, uninteresting high school student..... Even if my dad was a specialized Onmyouji, he was just a countryside Onmyou doctor."

"Right?" Harutora tried to solicit Touji's approval. Touji who was quietly watching their interaction from the side showed a wry smile, nodding his head.

"I know that. After all, he's my savior."

When Touji had been in Tokyo once before, he had been embroiled in a spiritual disaster, hovering on the brink between life and death, and had happened by an Onmyou doctor - a specialized doctor who used Onmyoudou techniques for treatment - who had been in Tokyo, who had managed to save him and his life.

That Onmyou doctor who had treated Touji was Harutora's father.

Even now, Touji still had remnants from the spiritual disaster lingering in his body, and he often had to receive treatment from Harutora's father because of this. The reason he had gone to remedial classes this time wasn't because his scores were bad, but because his treatment resulted in him spending too few hours in class. He had dabbled a bit in Onmyoudou, and had suffered first-hand effects, so he was quite knowledgeable about Onmyoudou techniques.

"Harutora's father is an excellent Onmyou doctor who doesn't shame the Tsuchimikado family one bit, completely different from his good-for-nothing son."

"Whatever, in any case I don't have any talent for Onmyouji techniques. I can't even see aura, but it's not bad, nothing's inconvenient about that."

Harutora dropped those remarks, and then raised his face to gulp a big chunk of ice.

An Onmyouji was a kind of extremely peculiar profession, and obviously a basic condition was some talent or quality, such as being able to sense aura - a

clairvoyant ability known as 'spirit-seeing'. Strength was also an essential endowment to be an Onmyouji.

But, Harutora didn't have the ability to see spirits, or in other words, Harutora wasn't suitable to become an Onmyouji. That was the most powerful evidence.

Hokuto was the only one who didn't accept that way of seeing things.

"Isn't it enough if you ask your dad to let you be able to 'see'? Such spells are included in Onmyouji techniques, right, Touji?"

"I think so. I've heard that with treatment from an Onmyouji with exceptional ability, the effects could last for many years."

Touji added his words. Hokuto showed a 'you see' look, staring at Harutora. Harutora just turned his head, rebutting:

"I said, for now it's not inconvenient this way.

More importantly, the golden age of the Tsuchimikado family was over a long time ago. Right now even the main family is declining like the aristocracy, and a

branch family like mine isn't much different from an ordinary family."

"In that case, Harutora can become an incredibly strong Onmyouji, and revive the Tsuchimikado family!"

"......Where does that enthusiasm of yours come from....."

An exhausted feeling of futility attacked Harutora, wearing him out. He wasn't interested and didn't believe himself to have talent, so it was really hard to accept that he had to be persuaded to become an Onmyouji just because he had been born to a notable family. He didn't understand why Hokuto was so interested.

"Ah, also, there's a talented girl the same age as me in the main family, so I don't need to bother with the mission of reviving the Tsuchimikado family."

Harutora said it like an aside, but Hokuto's eyes flashed when she heard that.

"......Are you talking about the girl you brought up before - that relative?"

"Right, she's talented. She went to Tokyo to study after graduating middle school. She's studying at a famous school that trains Onmyouji. Moreover, she's only sixteen , but was already designated as the heir to the Tsuchimikado family. I'll hand the Tsuchimikado family over to her, and the family honor will be maintained without worry."

"What are you saying? The other person's a girl, don't you feel frustrated?"

"Not a bit."

He replied quickly, and the girl lowered her head, downcast.

"......How sad, at the least you should feel a bit embarrassed."

"But the difference in ability between me and her is too big, so I don't have any reason to compare myself with her."

Harutora spoke casually.

"But, thanks to the main family having a talented girl, the people around her naturally won't expect much of a branch family child like me. When I told my mom and dad I was going to go to a mediocre high school, they didn't say much. I could even say that my days became much more relaxed because of her."

The final words were his true thoughts. Harutora wasn't jealous or envious of the main family girl at all, let alone feel inferior. In the end, he had no desire to become an Onmyouji, nor was he able to imagine having such a desire.

They had still contacted each other when he was small, but after middle school, their relationship had gradually become distant.

Especially now.....

".....Really?"

Hokuto asked quietly.

"What?"

"Is it really true that no one has expectations for you, Harutora?"

"I just said, probably..... not....."

Hokuto's eyes revealed a hurt feeling that they had never shown before, and Harutora became more and more hesitant as he spoke.

Hokuto stared straight into Harutora's eyes. He still hadn't made sense of the meaning in Hokuto's gaze, and felt as if his soul was almost absorbed into her big eyes.

The noise of the cicadas suddenly grew distant.

The scene from half a year before awakened in his mind. That winter day of his third year in middle school, when Harutora had decided to study in a normal high school...

A pair of magnificent, beautiful eyes stared straight at Harutora.

Tears suddenly glistened in the silent, moist almond eyes.

"Liar."

A daydream that flashed across his mind.

His chest was restless, and a deep pain ached like an old wound.

Now.

"......It's dripping."

Touji said.

Looking carefully, his shaved ice had melted, and most of it was dripping out of the cup in Harutora's hand. " Shit!' Harutora hastily stood up, but unfortunately a wet spot had long since been soaked into his pants.

At some time, the sun had moved, and only Harutora's hand was no longer under the shade of the trees. As expected of the unfortunate Harutora.

"Why didn't you say so earlier!"

"You should have noticed yourself first."

"......It looks like you peed yourself."

"You seem very happy, Hokuto!"

Harutora's face reddened, and Hokuto recovered her normal expression, laughing cheerfully. "Here." She offered her handkerchief. Despite being unwilling for many reasons, all Harutora could do was take her handkerchief and borrow it from her for the time being.

".....Alright, today's consultation will come to an end here. The branch family's eldest son is still in his first year of high school, so there should be no rush to decide his future path right now."

Touji squinted his eyes, looking at the clouds from under his bandanna.

Indeed, in this wave of increasing heat, the future seemed like there was a hazy picture presented by a mirage.

In any case, no one could accurately say what was to come.

More importantly, right now was summer vacation.

"Those people who want to become specialized Onmyouji work hard towards their Onmyouji goal once

they graduate from middle school." Hokuto replied, still unconvinced.

"It's no use even if you compare with other people, since in the end, Harutora can't see spirits. Do you think the current him can become an Onmyouji?"

"But....."

"In particular, his other grades are also so bad."

"Ah-"

"Why don't you have a rebuttal to that! And Touji, you're too nosy!"

The sound of the cicadas overshadowed Harutora's sounds of protest, and the sounds of Hokuto's laugh and Touji's sigh mixed in with it.

An August afternoon.

The blazing sun didn't show any signs of dying out.

Part 4

After that, Harutora and the others went to the arcade center, leisurely passing time, and separating when the sun began to drop.

In the last few days, they had been living this kind of life. Hokuto and Harutora weren't attending the same high school, but once summer vacation came, the three of them got together almost every day.

"Peace is really peaceful....."

"Boredom is also really boring."

Harutora replied to Touji's words as they walked along the shop-lined street towards the tram station during the evening. Since the direction back to Hokuto's home was different, she had separated from them earlier. The two males were together, both giving off the same lazy air.

The shopping street was bustling, and there was a swarm of people everywhere who had come to buy dinner. The smell of cola drifted by from the food stores, stimulating Harutora's hunger.

He noticed that posters announcing the fireworks festival were stuck on the walls of the stores and the utility poles. The fireworks festival was a festival held at the local shrine, and with the fireworks performance, it was highly attended every year.

The festival would be held tomorrow, and of course Harutora and the others, with nothing else to do, had decided to join in the fun together.

"Speaking of festivals, Touji, this is your first time attending."

Touji had moved here this spring, and the two of them had become friends at that time.

"Last year you went with Hokuto, right?"

"Right, I remember we went last year and the year before."

"Is that alright? This year there's gonna be a third wheel like me."

"Hey hey, Hokuto and I are normal friends, you couldn't be thinking that that tomboy and I are going out, right? The way she talks is the same as a guy."

Though she looked cute, she was a person who would throttle other people's necks from behind without thinking about it. The way she talked wasn't like a girl either, but rather the same as a boy, though he could only freely and casually hang out with Hokuto because of this.

After Touji heard Harutora's response, he slightly raised his right eyebrow.

"You two are just normal friends?'

"Right, the very first time we attended the festival, I only said something like 'It really seems like we're on a date'..."

"...She got mad, and denied it?"

"Right, I frantically explained that I was joking, and who knows if she heard it, since she kept making me treat her to things. That time was really unfortunate."

"......Harutora."

"What?"

"The nickname Bakatora is quite apt."

"What!"

Harutora stared at Touji, unconvinced. Touji was too bored to make a reply, but instead the faint trace of a smile passed by his lips.

"But, Hokuto wasn't that annoying at the time, and she wouldn't bring up Onmyouji matters much. It probably started at the beginning of this year? She suddenly started pestering me..... But actually, I don't know what evil ideas she's planning."

Harutora could understand if she wanted to become an Onmyouji herself. But he didn't know what was in her brain, trying to make a person who just happened to be in a notable family become an Onmyouji on the basis of his family's history. Even if she were just having fun, this kind of attitude was way too annoying.

".....She can't accept that you're being looked down upon, huh?"

"No one's looking down on me. To say the truth, she's the one who's looking down on me the most."

"That's true."

"Also, she doesn't get the circumstances, the Tsuchimikado lost their position long ago."

Harutora didn't stop muttering complaints.

A clearly deriding smirk emerged on Touji's face as he listened.

"You can't fault her for that, since after all she's not clear on the inside information. You should just flat-out tell her that the current Tsuchimikado family can't be called notable, and they're actually pushed out of things."

Touji's words were icy, and Harutora couldn't help but display his bitterness.

Hokuto had spoken the truth. The Tsuchimikado family had truly been the legitimate clan through the Heian era, a famous Onmyoudou family.

However, that name had become much harder to say in the onmyoudou community since modern Japan.

The Tsuchimikado family's ancestor Abe no Seimei, of whom countless stories were told, was well known even today. But his children, the Tsuchimikado family, were almost unknown to anyone, and for the most part only people 'in the industry' would react upon hearing that name.

After the Meiji Restoration, the Onmyou Bureau - the organization in charge of the various Onmyouji - was abolished due to the implementation of new policies, and the Tsuchimikado no longer held a famous name in Onmyoudou. The decline of the Tsuchimikado could even be traced further back to the Tokugawa Shogunate, when a large part of the actual Onmyoudou-related power was shifted to the Kurahashi and Wakasugi branch families, and though Tsuchimikado was the main family, it was reduced to an empty shell.

But, when the Meiji era ended, after the Taishou era ended and entered the Showa, Japan was enveloped by the fires of war, and the Tsuchimikado family unexpectedly received attention again.

On the eve of the outbreak of the Pacific War, the higher ups in the Japanese military who believed in religion and supernatural powers planned to utilize magic in the war effort.

This group of people revived the Onmyou Bureau, and appointed the youth who had just become the head of the Tsuchimikado family - Tsuchimikado Yakou - to lead it.

However, things might actually have been just the opposite.

The military revived the strange, ancient Onmyou Bureau, wiped off the dust and reconstructed it, and even invested large sums of money into research and development, all because they had been clearly shown the effects of one man's 'magic'. And that person was Tsuchimikado Yakou. His strength and incomparable magical talent provoked the military's attention.

The young head of the Tsuchimikado family received the military's support with funding and manpower, succeeding in a historic reform of Japanese magic.

Not only did he study magic, moreover, he integrated Esoteric Buddhism, Shugendo, Shinto, and other

Japanese religious denominations with magic, and added unique insights, forming a brand-new system of magic. At the same time, this was a completion of the kind of extremely viable and useful magic that the military had requested.

Near the war's end, the completed system of magic was refined and development was further streamlined, becoming the Onmyoudou of modern Japan--

'General Onmyoudou'. In other words, Tsuchimikado Yakou could be said to be the father of modern magic.

Even so, the name Yakou had now become taboo amongst the magic community.

The source of this taboo happened during the final days of Japan's defeat in the Pacific war.

At the time, the military turned to the Onmyou Bureau in their dead end, escaping from reality and gradually losing their sanity. The military pleaded Yakou to hold a large-scale magic ritual to turn the tables - which ultimately ended in failure.

There were no detailed records left behind related to this ritual, but it led to quite devastating aftereffects.

Yakou who was performing the ritual was killed, but not only this, as an effect of the ritual, the aura of Tokyo was heavily disrupted, destroying the original balance and leading to a huge spiritual disaster like never before.

It was rumored at the time that the Hyakki Yagyou[3] had strode into the capital overnight.

But, Tokyo was being hit by a United States military raid at the time, and the city was almost paralyzed, so in actuality there was no way to grasp the truth of the situation, and what had actually happened was unclear.

".....But it sounds to me like these were a long time ago ..... It was just a big blunder made by your ancestor during the last century."

"Right." Harutora replied quietly in a dry voice.

In any case, the disruption of aura had gradually stabilized to some degree as time passed, but a complete recovery of the disruption still couldn't be seen even after the war was over. The researchers all believed that during Yakou's ritual, some sort of critical change had occurred.

As a result, during the occupation by the United States government, the Onmyou Bureau was assigned to deal with spiritual disasters that continued occurring even after the war - everything was handed over to the Onmyou Bureau to dispose of. After Yakou's death, the half-ruined Onmyou Bureau also separated from the military, focusing on countering Tokyo's spiritual disasters. Ironically, what they used was Yakou's powerful completed Onmyoudou.

Now, the Onmyou Bureau had changed its name to the Onmyou Agency, and supervised all of the various magic-users of the country, but its main duty was to suppress spiritual disasters that broke out in Japan - most of which were in Tokyo.

The traces that Yakou had left behind still bound Japan's magic community, and Onmyoudou history went hand in hand with the Tsuchimikado family's woes. It wouldn't be too much to say that the situation of the modern Japanese magic community had deep roots in the Tsuchimikado family.

"You really were born in a complicated family."

"You don't say."

There were piles of books related to this history, of which not a single part was left in the dark.

But, except people like Touji who involved himself of his own initiative, no one would have the opportunity to come in contact with this knowledge.

"Why don't you go find Hokuto and explain to her what a complex situation the Tsuchimikado family is in right now?'

"But, I'm scared she'll reply to me 'Then it's up to you to wash off your ancestor's stigma!' and get even more excited."

"There's a good chance."

"Speaking of which, does she really not know about these things, seeing as she's so excited to persuade?"

"The great spiritual disaster was mentioned in the textbooks at school, but Yakou's name doesn't appear."

"But she somehow knows that the Tsuchimikado family was famous. That's quite obscure knowledge."

"Talking about it right now is no use, and more importantly she was full of mystery from the start, so it wouldn't be strange whatever the circumstances."

"Yeah....."

Harutora crossed his arms as he walked on the road, becoming vexed.

He and Hokuto had known each other for a long time, but actually the two of them had met each other by chance. The two of them were of a similar age, but he didn't know what high school Hokuto attended, where she lived, or even her last name. In addition, Hokuto always avoided those matters with a laugh.

"Could it be that she's a spy for the Onmyouji?"

"It's a national organization, what 'spies'."

"Then, could it be that she's a member of an underground magic organization?"

"To think you even started thinking about the underground."

Touji's cold gaze glanced over at Harutora who was deep in thought as useless thoughts unfolded before him.

"What do you think yourself, Harutora?"

"Huh? Think about what?"

"About Onmyouji. Do you want to become an Onmyouji?"

"Hey, how come even you're saying those things, didn't you just say that I didn't have the talent?"

"It doesn't matter whether you have talent or not, I asked whether you were interested."

Touji asked with a teasing tone. Touji always had the bad habit of talking about ridiculous topics with a serious tone.

"......Honestly, when I was small I believed that I would definitely become an Onmyouji in the future..... I truly thought that."

"Really."

"But it wasn't because I wanted to, but rather just because the 'traditions' were like that, so I had no choice - that's all I thought."

"Tradition?"

"Yeah, it counts as 'family tradition' .....I guess."

Harutora replied vaguely.

"But, it was all when I was small. I asked my dad once, and the 'tradition' seems like it was just a custom from the past. He also told me before I decided to attend this high school that the current era was different, and that I could decide for myself."

When he was a child, he had admired Abe no Seimei, and played Onmyouji games whole-heartedly. Until he entered middle school, every day he would always practice the motions of taking out talismans from a box and throwing them, and would make poses standing in front of the mirror. It was a past he couldn't confess to Touji even if he had to die for it.

After he learned that he had no talent, that enthusiasm also gradually dissipated, and he changed to thinking about other things - extremely normal things.

That sort of shift shouldn't be strange. There were quite a few children who wanted to become athletes or astronauts, but the vast majority of them soon forgot their childhood dreams.

".....If I had the talent, maybe things wouldn't be the same....."

If he, the branch family son, had been able to see spirits, his life would definitely be vastly different from how it was now. He didn't know whether this way was good or bad.

Just when he was thinking about this...

".....I feel like you have talent."

Touji said this casually. Harutora was surprised, and couldn't help from smiling bitterly.

"What are you saying, it's creepy. Don't comfort me."

"I'm just saying the truth. Can't you use talismans?"

"Talismans? Are you talking about healing charms? That's just imitating my dad's movements. The only

incantation I know is the standard 'Order', and more importantly I can't even see spirits, so I would just be screwing around."

'Though I even studied what stances to make.' Harutora secretly added that in his heart.

Harutora had been hit by cars twelve times, and had gotten used to injuries long ago. When he was injured, occasionally he would quietly steal some healing charms from his father's treatment room. The charms he stole were used for treating injuries, and even a normal person could see results if the spirit energy of the user or the target was strong.

".....But, they're pretty effective."

"No way, that's normal."

Harutora grinned, waving his hand lightly. Touji looked at him thoughtfully without saying anything.

"Even a Bakatora is still a tiger....."

"Touji, why are you calling me Bakatora too?"

Harutora got angry, and Touji snickered.

After they left the shopping street, they reached the tram station. "Bye." Touji waved his hand, walking out of the turnstile.

Harutora's home was on the other end of the tram station, and he walked towards the bridge over the tram tracks after saying bye to Touji.

He climbed the stairs, walking up the bridge.

The tram passed by below his feet, making a rattling noise.

There weren't many big buildings nearby, and the view from on top of the bridge was extensive, providing a view of the twilight streetscape, and even the vast fields and the mountain ridges in the distance were within view.

At this time, the originally vigorous sunlight had also diminished from how it had been in the afternoon, and the wind sweeping past the bridge and blowing against his sweaty back was incredibly comfortable.

Early tomorrow he would have to take remedial classes again, but the festival was that evening. Takoyaki,

fried noodles, and candied apples. The excited Hokuto and the easygoing Touji.

It seemed like it would be very fun.

...This wasn't bad.

Harutora unconsciously relaxed, enjoying the twilight of the summer sunset, leisurely walking across the bridge .

He walked to the stairs on the other end, and was about to walk down, when he ran into a pedestrian walking up from the bottom.

He gasped.

The pedestrian raised her head, perhaps noticing something strange above her - then, her feet stopped on the stairs as if she had been frozen.

A pair of magnificent, beautiful eyes opened wide.

The girl wore a plain black dress whose chest was decorated with lace. She held a small handbag, from which a brown straw hat entwined with an orange ribbon hung down.

The straw hat danced about from the buffeting of the bridge's strong wind. The wind blew out her long hair, drawing out an arc in the air. She didn't move at all, quietly gazing at Harutora. Harutora was the same.

She should be in Tokyo.

Why was she here?

Just as Harutora was wondering...

"It, It's been a long time, Harutora-kun."

His childhood friend with the same family name softly called out to Harutora, still showing a look of surprise.

Harutora silently nodded his head to reply, standing still and not saying a word.

The youngster of the branch family and the maiden of the main family--

Tsuchimikado Harutora and Tsuchumikado Natsume, separated for a long time, met again.

She had finally finished it.

Her taut nerves were released, and the girl exhaled deeply.

She had been staying alone in the personal research lab that she had specially prepared, and a sharp smile of victory emerged on her face. Before her eyes was a

square glass case one meter long, placed on a large table, and a black cat impatiently walked back and forth inside the case.

Just one hour before, that black cat had been in a state of death.

This was just an experiment, but she had already fully grasped the procedure, and all that was left was to fulfill all of the requirements.

In other words - she just needed to prepare the altar and the priest.

She reached her hand to the phone in the research lab, dialed an outside line, planning to call for the target with some fabricated reason.

But, the reply from the other side was outside of her expectations.

"Summer vacation?"

Her lips unconsciously thinned. She had lived a life isolated from the world for so long, she hadn't had time to pay attention to her target's schedule.

After hanging up the phone, she turned around to look at a corner of the room. There was a giant container there with a strong magic placed on it, but it wasn't just any container.

It was a coffin.

The coffin's lid was closed tight. A slight trace of emotion flashed through the depths of the girl's eyes.

Just then, a faint sound came from behind her. She turned back around, and the black cat in the glass case had collapsed again.

She had failed. She ground her teeth strongly, driving herself on.

"There's no problem..... I'll definitely succeed."

Just then--

The doors of the research lab were kicked open, and a group of men wearing suits rushed in.

They held guns or gripped talismans.

"Don't move! You're under arrest for suspicion of using forbidden magic!"

The man who was the leader pointed his gun at the girl, showing proof of his identity. They were investigators of magical crimes - known as Mystical Investigators. They must have always been performing secret surveillance on her to have broken in at this time.

The corners of the girl's mouth curved in an arrogant smile.

"......Who do you think you are?"

In that moment, the girl launched the plans that she had been preparing for a long time.

Chapter 2 - Begin Worship

Part 1

"Uh..... Why are you here?"

".....My summer vacation starts today."

"Oh, I see, so you came back?"

"Yes....."

Natsume replied to every question Harutora asked with a stiff voice.

Harutora and Natsume stood side to side on the bridge at twilight, leaning slightly on the railings mottled with paint.

The wind blew lightly by the two of them, bringing a bit of a chill. The sun sank in the west, and the vast sky was quickly being dyed in the colors of the night.

"Will you be here long?"

".....About one week."

"Oh, the Onmyou Academy's summer break really is short."

"......Actually, it's not that short."

"Huh?"

"I have a lot of things I have to do there."

"Uh, oh, I see."

Harutora scratched his cheek uninterestedly, glancing at Natsume out of the corner of his eye.

Her head was slightly lowered, looking at her own feet . For some reason, she looked a bit angry. On the other hand, Natsume's face always had a slight hint of dissatisfaction, and that look contrasted greatly with her beauty.

She was a girl for whom the word 'beautiful' was more fitting than 'cute', who gave off an impression of calmness and tranquility exceeding her true age.

Her eyelashes were long, her nose was turned-up, and her cheeks were thin, with smooth lines from her chin down her neck like a flower blooming in the shadows,

but at best this was just an exterior facade. If one probed her more deeply, he would notice the pride and keen spirit that hid inside her heart. The black hair that floated in the wind danced freely with no regard for her image.

There was only a space of one meter between the two, and they carried out a choppy conversation, each looking for words to say.

Also, they had chosen different directions to move forward in.

They were familiar with each other but didn't understand each other - This made Harutora feel mystified. The two hadn't met in a long time, but he had nothing to say.

They hadn't been such strangers to each other when they were children, but since they had entered middle school, they had kept up this kind of relationship. Natsume who was born in the main family had been expected to become an Onmyouji since she was small, and had received the relevant basic training. The mentality of her and the people around her regarding this matter was different from Harutora's, who never had a bit of spirit-seeing talent.

"How's the Onmyou Academy life?"

"......What do you mean, how is it?"

"Is it interesting?"

"......I don't know, I'm not sure."

"I, I see. Uh, it's different from a normal high school after all. Is it tiring?"

"As for tiring, rather than the Onmyou Academy, the ' tradition' is more....."

Harutora was surprised. It had already been a long time since he had heard that word.

"Huh?"

"Oh, it's nothing, nothing at all....."

Natsume hurriedly glossed over it, and Harutora didn't pursue the question further, awkwardly searching for a new topic.

"What about Tokyo? Is it convenient to live there?"

"......It's pretty convenient."

"I, I see. You probably met some new friends there, right?"

"Friends, you say?"

"Huh? You didn't meet new friends?"

"......I'm not very sure."

Natsume's tone was vague, and her reply was dull. To the eyes of someone who didn't know her, her attitude might seem cold and emotionless.

Actually, Natsume had always been extremely shy since she had been small. The current her was even more reticent, but because the other party was Harutora, she was already talking more than when she conversed with other people.

"Haha, how worrying, you never were very sociable."

"Right."

"You couldn't be being bullied, right?"

"You don't need to worry about that. As long as you have power there, you won't need to fear being looked down upon."

The attitude she spoke with was refined, but the words she spoke weren't bashful at all. Natsume's manner of retorting hadn't changed at all since she had been small, and Harutora couldn't help but smile wryly.

"You speak as directly as before."

"......I'm speaking the truth."

"But, you won't make friends like that."

He carelessly spoke his true thoughts.

Then, he noticed that Natsume's mood was beginning one of its rare swings, as if anger was spilling out of the mask that was her face.

He tried to stop himself, but unfortunately it was too late.

"......Then, Harutora-kun?"

"What?"

"Let me ask you, after you entered high school, what useful friends did you meet?"

"U, Useful..... Friends aren't related to being useful or not, right?"

"Is that so?"

"It is. If you can happily get along together, you count as friends."

Harutora tried not to rock the boat, replying to Natsume's defiant statement with a smile.

However, Natsume continued speaking with a cold tone:

"Friends are those who you compete with and learn from."

"Th, That can't be all friends are, right?"

"No, you don't believe it because you laze around every day, which is why a group of good-for-nothings gathered around you."

".....Hey."

Harutora's tone dripped with an anger that couldn't be held back.

In that moment, a flash of regret showed in Natsume's eyes.

But, in the next moment, her eyes gave off an even stronger aggressive light, as if to dispel her remorse.

".....Harutora-kun, you must be clear on the Tsuchimikado family's current condition, right? I am the next heir who will inherit the Tsuchimikado family. I have a duty as the next family head, and I have no time to pass empty days, nor do I have time to hang out all day with useless friends."

Her cute image changed, as if to a sharp blade. There was no rage in her tone, but it was like a katana being unsheathed, filled with calm resolution.

Also.

"...I'm different from you."

As she said those final words, a cold smile of disdain even emerged on her face. He really couldn't fight back against that demeanor of Natsume's.

Harutora knew she was right, the two of them were truly different. No, he only felt angry because they were different.

".....Your words are still as vicious as ever."

"I'm speaking the truth, like I said just now."

"As expected of a prodigy, even the words you say are different from others."

"Stating the truth has nothing to do with prodigies or mediocrities."

Harutora was half a head taller than Natsume. He stared down, but Natsume glared up with her head raised, and the gazes of the two clashed in midair, scattering formless sparks.

But, Harutora observed that the situation was unfavorable for him. He 'owed' Natsume. Even if he didn't feel that he had any responsibility, he actually felt sorry.

So...

".....You really aren't cute at all."

He lashed out with those words, quickly turning around as if he wanted to flee.

Natsume's response after hearing those words was far removed from her confrontational attitude just now. Since Harutora had turned around, he didn't notice - his childhood playmate's eyes had reddened.

".....Don't worry."

Natsume desperately suppressed the slight trembling in her voice, telling Harutora.

"I won't ask you to change your current way of living, you can continue your happy days. I'll guard the Tsuchimikado - our family - myself."

Different from the weak blow lashed out by the branch family's son, Natsume's words hit Harutora hard.

Harutora could say nothing back, and Natsume quickly recovered her self-control when she saw Harutora's silence.

She nodded lightly with manners that could almost be described as overly polite.

"...Good night."

After saying that, she made a neat turn, walking across the bridge.

After her beautiful black hair dropped across her back, she departed without turning back.

Feeling anxiety and disgust in his heart, Harutora scrunched up his face.

He couldn't move his feet, and just quietly watched Natsume leave.

"......Tch."

He clicked.

..."Liar".

Harutora had to admit, he truly owed Natsume.

Part 2

The next day's weather was sunny, a good weather suitable for holding a fireworks festival.

The festival location was a shrine outside the city, and included the riverbank behind the shrine. Maybe because of the numerous stands or the enthusiasm given off by the attendees, the day's heat seemed completely unabated. Lively noise sounded out often, and the summer sun blended with the air, as if just by breathing in one could taste the flavor of summer.

"......You hadn't seen the prodigy girl of the main family for half a year, and fought as soon as you saw each other."

Touji leaned against the vast stone wall encircling the shrine, speaking incredulously as well as teasingly.

Harutora and Touji had finished their remedial classes, and they waited in the agreed-upon location. Hokuto was late, and hadn't shown up yet.

As they waited for Hokuto to come, Harutora had revealed the business that had happened yesterday evening to Touji. He hadn't planned on talking about it, but Touji's eyes were sharp and had seen that Harutora's demeanor was different from yesterday's, and unexpectedly, this classmate was a master of persuasion. Somehow, Harutora had not only spilled the conversation on the bridge, but had even thoroughly talked about his relationship with Natsume.

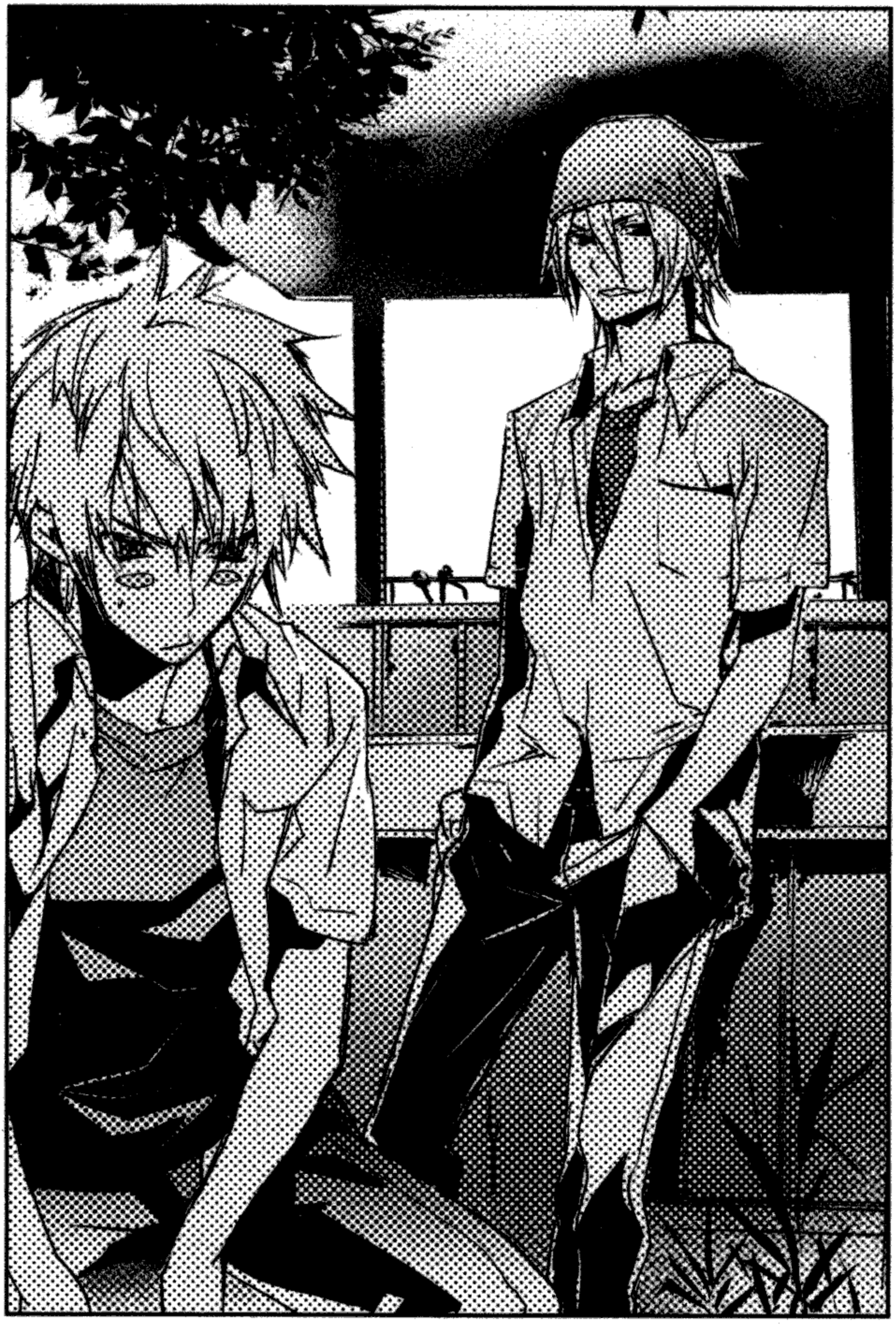
"What do you honestly think?"

"You suck."

"......You're too honest....."

"You guys can't talk at all. The next time I go pick up girls, you better not come with me."

Touji smiled coldly from under his bandanna. Harutora squatted on the ground, looking upsettedly at him.



Harutora would always express as nice of an attitude as possible, but in the end there weren't many girls' numbers in his phone - the number being meager enough to count on one hand - and it would be a great difficulty for him to take a more complex approach.

"I admit I was a bit childish at the end..... But she provoked me first."

"It doesn't matter who it was, you could never talk with girls."

Touji was completely unconcerned as he spoke mercilessly, but Harutora couldn't even muster up the strength for a retort.

"But, as expected of a great family, even the branch family has to comply with tradition and become a shikigami for the main family....."

Touji didn't mind the downcast Harutora, muttering sarcastically.

'Shikigami' referred to servants that Onmyouji manipulated, 'shiki' meaning 'servitude', and shikigami being 'spirits who serve their practitioner'.[4]

For example, the 'General Onmyoudou' that the Onmyou Agency formally adopted primarily used manmade shikigami, which were created by putting magical energy into a ‘core’ that was the vessel. There were simple shikigami that the practitioner could use on the spot, as well as all kinds of individually-created shikigami.

The 'tradition' of the Tsuchimikado family was that the branch family had to serve the main family as a shikigami.

"Hey, slow down, in that case, did Yakou also have shikigami like that?"

"I don't know. He should have, though I'm not very sure."

"Yakou's shikigami Hishamaru and Kakugyouki..... Could they have been human?"

"I just said I don't know."

Touji showed a strong curiosity, but Harutora just dismissed it casually.

"Come to think of it, never mind Yakou's time, don't you think it's too strict to have to comply with these ' traditions' now? That's too pethantic."

"......You couldn't be meaning to say 'pedantic', right?"

Touji's gaze became colder. Harutora's face reddened, arguing: 'It means the same thing!'

"In any case, it's unsuited to the times! No wonder my dad told me not to be too concerned."

"Is that so?"

"Isn't it? Think about it, forcing people to become shikigami, isn't that just ignoring human rights! That kind of tradition doesn't see people as humans at all!"

Most people would think of the manipulation of shikigami and use of charms when asked about the most representative magical techniques of Onmyouji.

However, shikigami were the partners and guards of the practitioner, and to put it roughly, they were servants or slaves, even 'tools'.

However...

"There were a lot of situations where people became shikigami."

"Don't talk nonsense, shikigami can disappear wherever and whenever."

"That's a metaphor. Simply put, shikigami are actually subordinates that act according to their master's orders. For example the ninjas who served during the Warring States period were a broad kind of shikigami."

"......In any case, that's in the past."

"From a modern point of view, the relationship between the practitioner and shikigami is about the same as between a coach and athlete..... Uh, it’s a bit different with regard to absolute obedience."

"What do you mean, a bit different! That part's the most important!"

Harutora thought of the conversation yesterday on the bridge. Absolute obedience to Natsume's order? Impossible. He couldn't do it. It wasn't even a question of whether he had talent as an Onmyouji anymore.

"......On the other hand, if I were a spirit-seer, there would be a high chance I would have ended up like that.. ...."

From Natsume's tone yesterday, she might be unexpectedly committed to the revitalization of the Tsuchimikado family. Was that as a result of her position or personality? Whichever it was, Harutora was completely uninterested in accompanying his childhood friend in chasing after that lofty ambition.

"What 'useless friends', what 'duty as a family heir'..... Doesn't she get tired of dramatizing things?"

"She's pretty straightforward."

"Straightforward how? Ha."

"'I'm lonely'... That's what the next heir of the main family actually meant, right?"

Touji looked at Harutora, and his gaze momentarily flashed with a sharp light. Those words felt hugely unexpected to Harutora, who went speechless for some time.

...That Natsume, showing weakness to me? But..... how could that.....

But, it wasn't impossible. People who wanted to become specialized Onmyouji congregated at the Onmyou Academy that Natsume studied at, and of course these students knew the relationship between the Tsuchimikado family and Tsuchimikado Yakou. Natsume, alone, associated with these people, studying Onmyoudou.

Moreover, Natsume was gifted, and that could very possibly lead to jealousy or resentment. Considering her personality, it was really hard to imagine her being able to find a happy group of friends or wash away her negative emotions. In that case, could it be that she spent every day in Tokyo unhappily?

"....."

Harutora frowned, looking depressed and staying silent. Touji lowered his head to look at Harutora with interest, as if he thought him to be simple and easy to understand.

".....Okay, you were just rejected, don't be upset, it's not the end of the world, right?" Touji's gaze turned to

behind Harutora as he spoke while shrugging his shoulders.

Harutora stopped his deep thoughts, looking upwards with an annoyed expression.

"Who did you say got rejected?"

"......Who got rejected?"

A terrifying voice that sounded like a volcano about to erupt rang out.

It was Hokuto.

Touji grinned, and Harutora who was squatting on the ground hurriedly stood up. Harutora turned around as if to resolve the misunderstanding, but choked just as the words were about to leave his mouth.

His eyes widened blankly.

Seeing Harutora's reaction, Hokuto said: "......What..." and turned her head, glancing at Harutora out of the corner of her eye. She pretended to be calm, but her face was flushed from expectation and tension, and her toes anxiously traced circles in the ground.

Touji coughed lightly.

Harutora hurriedly spoke:

"Y, You're late, Hokuto."

"......Sorry."

Touji coughed again.

"Um, no, it's alright..... Well..... What happened, for you to be dressed like that?"

This time Touji didn't cough again, but sighed lightly instead. The tense Hokuto slowly puffed out her cheeks.

"Nothing! I just wore a yukata because I was attending a festival, something wrong?!"

Hokuto was currently wearing a yukata.

It was a black-colored yukata, decorated with white peonies[5] and butterflies near the top, with an elegant pink belt. Her entire body gave off a traditional and mature air, as if a completely different person from the Hokuto of yesterday.

"No, no, sorry! That..... Seeing you dressed like this, I feel like it doesn't seem like you..... I, I was surprised because that appearance looks really unexpected, so I doubted my own eyes....."

The volcanic activity in Hokuto's heart became more and more active every time the flustered Harutora opened his mouth, seeming like it would erupt from the crater at any time. The excitement-filled eyes that she had gazed at Harutora with gradually filled with tears. Touji, standing behind Harutora, covered his face because he couldn't stand it.

But...

"But... it looks good on you. It really surprised me."

The moment before the volcano erupted, Hokuto's anger disappeared.

".....R, Really?"

"Yeah, how should I put it..... It looks fresh, and seems more mature than usual."

Harutora also wasn't really clear on what to say, and spoke hesitatingly, honestly saying his heartfelt thoughts.

Hokuto moved her gaze, as if spying on Harutora's expression. He hadn't done anything of note, but his heartbeat quickened.

Not long after, Hokuto expressed her satisfaction, relaxing and composing herself.

"......Thanks."

She feigned calm, holding the corners of her mouth back from forming a smile, and thanked him quietly.

The two of them sank into silence.

Hokuto's gaze flicked around, seeming bashful, and Harutora stood still, also showing a fidgeting and anxious appearance. The two of them both seemed like they wanted to open their mouths, but they couldn't catch the opportunity.

The silence continued.

Touji silently counted to a hundred.

After that, he decided not to keep waiting.

"Alright, since Hokuto's here too, we should be about ready to go take a look, right?"

Harutora and Hokuto nodded their heads slightly, as if feeling relieved.

Unfortunately, Hokuto's mature air didn't last long.

"Next, cotton candy! I want to eat cotton candy!"

"......Why don't you eat the candied apple in your right hand and the chocolate banana in your left hand first."

"Harutora, there are masks! Hey, which one's good? Which one do you think is good?"

"The clown..... No, I'm kidding! I was joking, don't kick me with your sandals!"

"I see goldfish! Yeah!"

"Wait! Don't run around wearing a yukata! What kind of person can run that fast in a yukata!?"

She was inordinately happy, so excited that she even scared a group of elementary students walking by her, having completely returned to her normal tomboy demeanor.

Touji was stunned.

"......Was she like this last year too?"

"She was even worse last year."

Harutora replied with a dry smile from behind Hokuto .

Hokuto would normally occasionally be childish, but once she entered this celebration, she seemed as if she had truly become a child. "Harutora, look at this!", " Harutora, come here!" - Her eyes flashed with light as she pulled Harutora's arm, pointing to mundane booths one after another.

Actually, Harutora would sometimes feel like he couldn't put up with it, but once he saw Hokuto's carefree smile, he would completely swallow that anger and his derisive words. It was a happy thing to see the sincerely joyful face of others.

Also, when he was with the naive Hokuto, he wouldn't have to remember the past.

Long ago, when he was still a small child. Every time he went to the main family, his childhood friend would be overjoyed, her face flushed with happiness.

She would listen to whatever Harutora had to say, always following him around.....

Harutora inadvertently thought about a question.

...Could it be that she attended the festival?

He couldn't imagine it. Natsume might not even know what fun was in the first place, having been ignorantly shackled to the name Tsuchimikado, and living her life by studying and training every day.

While he was having fun at the moment, what was she doing-

Just then.....

".....Harutora?"

Touji called out quietly, and Harutora hurriedly recomposed himself in surprise.

"What is it?"

"Uh..... Nothing, never mind."

Harutora smiled, glossing things over and letting his consciousness return to the festival before him.

The sun was setting in the west, and the lights hung on the stalls along with the rows of lanterns illuminated the surroundings. The fireworks performance would begin in a while.

Just then, Hokuto, who had originally been squatting on the ground looking wide-eyed into the small eyes of the goldfish, stood up.

"Ah! What's that? I never saw it before!"

"Oh, it's a shooting range, how nostalgic."

Just as Harutora spoke, Hokuto had already rushed to the booth with the shooting game.

Harutora hurriedly chased after her, and Touji also followed behind. There were a pair of what seemed like college-aged lovers taking the challenge, and Hokuto stood to the side after rushing ahead, carefully observing them.

".....So it's played like that, you use that toy gun to knock over the prizes in there, right? And then you can get the prizes you knock over....."

"You've never played it?"

"Didn't I just say I never saw it before!"

Saying this, Hokuto paid the price per play (two hundred yen) to the booth manager.

The manager gave her a toy gun.

".....How do I use this?"

She looked at Harutora, and Harutora took the toy gun from her hands, pulled the spring, and stuffed the cork bullet into the muzzle.

"Then you just need to pull the trigger."

"Thanks! Then, let's see, what prizes should I get?"

"Listen, Hokuto, you can't get whatever big prizes you want in this kind of game, not only will you be unable to hit them, even if you hit, the prizes won't fall over if they're too heavy. In theory, you should set your target on the row placed in the very front, those are the comparatively light prizes--"

"Ah, I missed."

"Listen to me!"

Hokuto began shooting on her own, and didn't hit a prize a single time. She bravely aimed the gun at the highest row, with a ribbon-wrapped box as her target, completely unheeding of Harutora's proposal.

Touji chewed a grilled squid that he had bought at some point in time, joining the fun from the side. The fried smell of soy sauce was mouth-watering.

"Uu, really, they all missed!"

"That's your own fault."

"Harutora, I want that prize."

"Don't be troublesome."

"What about Touji? You look like you'd be good at this kind of game."

"Not interested."

Hearing their cold replies, Hokuto showed a reproachful look, saying 'so useless'. Then, she paid another two hundred yen again, and challenged it again.

Of course, her target was the ribbon-wrapped box on the highest row. She leaned forward as much as possible, extending the gun barrel, and the bottom of her yukata was lifted up high, making Harutora blush.

But, the outcome was the same, nothing hit. Hokuto was mad enough to stomp the ground.

"So annoying! It didn't even touch it!"

"I said it's no use to aim at the big prizes."

"One more time!"

"Give up."

"No! I want that!"

She was truly a child. 'Harutora.' Touji stood behind him, putting a word in lazily as if wanting him to think of something. Muttering 'what does it have to do with me' in his heart, Harutora accepted the toy gun that Hokuto handed over, and paid two hundred yen.

"But I'm really bad at this game....."

Just as he confessed, his shots curved one after another .

Harutora's luck was simply the worst possible, and regardless of where he aimed, the bullets would fly in impossible directions. The change in his wallet was spent in moments, and even like that, Hokuto still didn't let him go, and the money he spent quickly broke a thousand yen.

"If the bullet doesn't hit this time, give up."

After saying this, he put in the last bullet, leaning forward.

Hokuto's heart leaped anxiously as she stared at Harutora.

Then, she blushed as if thinking up something.

Harutora was currently aiming. Hokuto seemed a bit hesitant, but she still lowered herself, putting her face close to Harutora's ear.

"Hey, Harutora."

"......Don't talk to me for now."

"If you get that prize....."

"Don't talk to me."

"I'll give you a kiss."

His hand lost control for a moment.

The cork that clearly did not advance in the same direction as the gun barrel traced a beautiful arc, hitting the ribbon-wrapped box dead center. The box let out an unexpectedly hollow sound, falling off the stand.

Hokuto jumped up and down, cheering loudly. Touji stuck the grilled squid in his mouth, clapping his hands leisurely. But, Harutora wasn't as unperturbed.

"H, Hokuto, you.....!"

"Huh? What about me?"

"Uh, that, you said..... If I got that prize....."

"What? What is it, Harutora?"

Hokuto faked a casual appearance, smiling sweetly and slightly tilting her head. It was clearly the smile of a criminal.

'Tch!' Harutora regretted it, but the atmosphere right now wasn't suitable for bringing up what had just happened or continuing to pursue the question. Actually, if it were revisited, it would lead to trouble for Harutora.

"......When did you learn that move....."

"Hmm? I haven't gotten anything you've been talking about just now."

Hokuto laughed and turned around, and upon closer inspection, one could notice that half of that was to conceal her shyness. It seemed that Harutora wasn't the only one who feared unknown risks.

What was stunning was that the big prize Hokuto had insisted on getting turned out to be a bottle of soap and a straw.

A bubble-blowing set for children to play with was set inside the prize box, and placing it the highest up was just to fake out the customers.

"No wonder it fell over in one hit."

Touji laughed. Harutora's face reddened as he looked at the result of his fruitless labor.

But Hokuto didn't take it to heart at all.

"It's alright, this was what I wanted."

She untied the ribbon around the box, deftly tying it into her hair.

The ribbon was a beautiful pink, the same color as the belt on Hokuto's yukata. With the ribbon tied in her hair, it seemed as if it had been arranged for from the start.

"Ah." Harutora made a sound of praise.

"How is it?"

"You've also taken up hollow fashions."

Harutora spoke sarcastically, taking the opportunity to retaliate for his teasing just now.

But, Hokuto didn't budge. She stared into Harutora's eyes with a serious face.

"Is it cute?"

"....."

"It's very cute, right?"

"....."

"Say it's cute!"

"...Okay, I know. Cute, it's cute."

"Really?"

"I told you, since you forced me to say it..."

"....."

"Cute! It's really cute!"

Harutora could only praise it repeatedly upon encountering a look as if she would smack him at any time. Hokuto smiled lightly after hearing it, her entire body loosening.

"I won."

"O, Okay....."

"Really, Harutora really is a Bakatora who doesn't understand girls' hearts. If you properly said that my yukata was cute when you saw it, we wouldn't have had to waste so much effort."

"Hey, slow down. Just to get me to say the word cute, you wore that yukata you're not used to and made me spend a thousand yen on a shooting game to get that ribbon?"

"I won."

"......Fine, I lose."

Harutora felt exhausted, slackening his shoulders. Hokuto smiled brightly, joyfully playing with the ribbon.

"I'll treasure this."

"Do whatever you want, but it's super cheap."

"It's alright, because..."

"What?"

"No..... nothing."

Hokuto smiled shyly, taking out the bubble-blowing toy.

She dipped the front of the straw into the soapy water, and then pursed her lips, blowing into the straw.

Bubbles flashing in rainbow colors flew through the night sky.

Several children who had come with their parents cheered one after another upon seeing the bubbles. The ones cheering were a small boy and an even younger small girl who pulled at the boy's hand, seeming to be a pair of siblings. Maybe the reactions of the pair had pleased Hokuto, as she blew more bubbles towards the two children. The clump of bubbles wandered around dreamily, bursting and disappearing without a sound.

...This childish person.....

Hokuto turned from an adult talking about ribbons to a big sister playing with the children, without even a trace of her normal boyish air. Harutora was first stunned, and then felt humored, unable to help from grinning.

Hokuto noticed Harutora smiling at her, and blew bubbles at his face. "Hey, don't be annoying!" Harutora hurriedly escaped - Hokuto chased, and the siblings laughed even more happily.

At some time, smiles had emerged on everyone's faces.

Maybe this unobtrusive scene was a summer memory that would be remembered in the future.

"Alright..... What should we do next, Harutora? We should go over soon, right?"

Touji finished eating the grilled squid, and after checking the time, whispered words in Harutora's ear.

It was almost time for the fireworks performance, and though they could see the fireworks from here, the fireworks were shot from the riverbank, so the view was better from there.

Just then, Hokuto who had parted with the smiling siblings called out: "Ah, wait for me! Just a bit, I'll come right back!", parting from Harutora and Touji, and suddenly running off. Harutora and Touji looked at each other in surprise.

"What's she up to?"

"Who knows."

Though they didn't understand, they didn't think it would be good to wait where they were, so they shrugged their shoulders and followed Hokuto.

Hokuto had run towards the interior of the temple.

They walked up a small flight of stairs, passing under the torii[6]. There were no decorative lanterns around the temple, but there were stone lamps lighting the surroundings.

The further they walked inside, the further they went from the hustle and bustle behind them. The sounds of insects entered their ears, and the feeling of a summer night drifted through the dim surroundings with the shrine as a center.

They found Hokuto immediately. She was absorbed in praying in front of the wall of the temple where ema[7] were hung.

"What are you doing?"

"Ah... D, Didn't I tell you to wait?"

Hokuto hurriedly covered her ema once she heard the sudden call to her. Unfortunately, though the luminescence from the stone lamps was faint, the words on the ema were still clearly visible.

'I hope that Harutora becomes an Onmyouji.'

".....You....."

The originally joyful atmosphere froze over in an instant, and Hokuto's furtive appearance and the topic that he hadn't expected to come up at this time provoked him into anger.

".....Hokuto, haven't you had enough? I thought you would have let it go for this kind of time."

"Because....."

"There's no because! Why are you doing everything possible to make me become an Onmyouji, do you hate me living this kind of normal life that much?!"

"I, I didn't say that, it was just for Harutora's sake-"

Hokuto desperately denied it. But this time, the topic that normally made him tired and dumbfounded inexplicably evoked his anger, and he even felt shocked.

He understood the reason.

...'I have no time to pass empty days, nor do I have time to hang out all day with useless friends.'

Hokuto's words sounded to his ears like the criticism-filled words of his childhood friend.

But, it was wrong. It wasn't like that.

He wanted Hokuto at the least to understand that this wasn't the case.

"......Hey, Hokuto."

He suppressed his agitated emotions, speaking word by word:

"Maybe I'm indeed living a boring, insignificant and lax life right now, but I like this kind of life. I love these unrestricted days where I can hang out with you and Touji and do stupid things every day."

"Liar." Natsume had reproached him like this once.

Natsume had spoken correctly. He had broken their agreement, and hadn't complied with his promise to protect her by her side, and had willfully run off to live a normal life with normal people. He could do nothing about Natsume condemning him because of this.

But, as for Hokuto - He didn't want to hear Hokuto, who lived the same normal life as he did, open her mouth to deny his normal life.

"Hokuto....."

Harutora honestly confessed his innermost thoughts, taking a step towards Hokuto. Touji called out 'Harutora' as if to stop him, but he was deliberately ignored.

Hokuto showed a look as if she were being driven into a corner, holding her breath.

Harutora didn't let Hokuto go, staring intently into her eyes.

"At this point, I don't want to go run to some Onmyouji or the Tsuchimikado family to make relations and destroy my current life. Could it be that you don't think that way? Huh, Hokuto?"

Hokuto bit her lip.

After a long, tormenting silence...

She lowered her eyes, not saying a word.

Hokuto's response brought an unexpected shock to him, and he even felt like he had been betrayed.

"......Oh, so that's how it is."

He felt anger boiling inside him, but he didn't plan on restraining that anger. He reached his hand out to behind Hokuto's back, ignoring the cry and knocking away the arm that tried desperately to stop him, and grabbed the ema.

He tore down the ema, hurling it to the ground.

Hokuto made a weak wail.

"What are you doing!"

She ran to the ema fallen on the ground, brushed the dirt off of it, and held it tightly to her chest. It was as if she was moving to guard a valuable, and was simply intolerable in the current Harutora's eyes. He turned around haughtily, not letting himself look at Hokuto's teary gaze.

"......Harutora, you idiot!"

Hokuto yelled, rushing out. Her back disappeared in a flash from the other side of the torii. Harutora didn't turn around. The clattering sound of the sandals gradually moved away, but he still stubbornly looked ahead.

After a long while.

".....She's gone."

Touji quietly watched the situation unfold, calmly opening his mouth. Harutora couldn't suppress his rising anger, bitterly muttering: '.....Damn!'

"Oh my, such youth, not bad."

Touji spoke casually as always, but Harutora no longer had the energy to respond.

".....Do you think it was also my fault this time?"

"No, honestly, Hokuto was wrong."

Touji gave an unexpected reply. Harutora looked at Touji in surprise, but only saw him continue to speak with his normal calm:

"You're just 'useless'."

Touji's words sharply pricked his ears, and Harutora felt a particularly profound sensation when he heard this . His originally overexerted energy disappeared, and he collapsed like a deflated ball.

"Congratulations, you've been rejected two nights in a row. Looking at it this way, you really are a lover boy, Harutora."

"Shut up. Honestly, I'm incredibly frustrated right now ."

"It's not only magic that can bite."

"......What does that mean?'

"My meaning is, Hokuto who got hurt is definitely feeling even worse right now."

Harutora couldn't help but go somber when he heard this.

Just now, tears had glittered in Hokuto's eyes. Harutora had gotten furious, hurt Hokuto, and also - he had done it deliberately.

"What will you do? Do you want to chase after her? If you can't make up your mind, I'll punch you a couple times."

"Why would you be punching me?"

"To help encourage you. It's my duty to do that when this kind of time comes."

Touji grinned.

Right now, Touji seemed mellow, but actually he had been a violent delinquent who had fought all the time, punching and kicking people for breakfast. Harutora held up his hands, declining his proposal.

He slightly calmed down a bit.

...I was over the top.....

Touji might have said Hokuto was in the wrong because it was the judgment of his friend. Compared to Harutora who was a more important friend, Hokuto wasn't nearby, so he could have said she was 'wrong'.

Friendship wasn't forced. To take things to the extreme , Hokuto might believe Harutora wasn't a 'friend', and she was free to do so.

Of course, Harutora didn't think Hokuto looked down on him, and the two of them had known each other for a long time. But, even if Harutora thought Hokuto was an important friend, Hokuto didn't have to respond to his opinions with similar thoughts or attitudes. However differently the two viewed each other, that wasn't a reason to criticize the other.

".....I'll go after her."

Harutora contemplated the life before him. Touji and Hokuto were both indispensable parts of his life.

Just then.

"...Hold on."

Suddenly, someone spoke.

The one who had spoken to them was a person who seemed to have come out from the darkness of the temple, a man wearing a black suit and sunglasses.

Harutora and Touji looked at the clothes that were completely unfitting of a festival, and unconsciously moved backward half a step.

"Sorry to disturb you two, but I heard your conversation just now, and I learned that there was someone from the Tsuchimikado family here."

The man bowed his head respectfully, as if he hadn't noticed the reaction of the two.

He expressed to the confused Harutora:

"Actually, I'm searching for the person from the Tsuchimikado family according to my master's orders. Could you lend me a bit of your time and meet with my master?"

Part 3

The man brought Harutora and Touji near the stall where they had played the shooting game before.

Harutora had originally planned on refusing when the man told them his purpose. For the time being, the

matter with Hokuto hadn't yet been resolved, and even if that matter weren't troubling him, he didn't want to walk with this strange man anyway.

Though Harutora wasn't very willing, Touji had replied on his own, and that was why they had left the temple and were currently following behind the man.

"What will I do about Hokuto?"

"I sent her a text message, telling her to wait a bit."

Harutora asked, unconvinced, but Touji replied very thoroughly.

They walked behind the man while chatting.

"I know you care about Hokuto, but we have to prioritize dealing with the situation here. That person's looking for you because he knows you're from the Tsuchimikado family. If you escape now, it might get even more troublesome later."

"Why? They want to find someone from the Tsuchimikado family, and wouldn't someone from the main family or my dad be more suitable than me?"

"That would be right most of the time, but they deliberately came to this kind of place, and found you who looks totally like a student. Don't you feel that it's strange?"

"Then I should have less of a reason....."

"And there's a high probability that person isn't a human."

"What?"

"Are you interested?"

Touji grinned in front of the dumbstruck Harutora.

Touji was basically a reliable buddy, but the troublesome part was that he loved venturing into dangerous places. No, this wasn't too correct, he hated troublesome things, and more accurately, what he loved was excitement.

".....What 'loving peace'."[8]

"I love peace, but I love excitement more."

He replied with a calm tone, his eyes looking around without passing over any corner. Compared to Harutora who was full of an ominous premonition, he seemed happy enough to start singing.

People flooded towards the riverbank, and the festival was still extremely lively. The man's clothing was even more eminent in this happy group of people.

The man brought Harutora and Touji in front of a stand selling hot dogs.

"......I brought the people here."

Not only Harutora, but also even Touji was surprised once they saw the person who turned around.

The one who turned was a young girl.

Her age was clearly less than Harutora's, and she seemed about the age of a middle-schooler. She accepted a hot dog, squeezing a large amount of ketchup (though she didn't even give a glance towards the mustard) before turning around.

Those round eyes keenly looked over the figures of Harutora and Touji.

"......Hm, so it's you."

Her voice and exterior appearance appeared childlike, but her attitude and tone were extremely overbearing and prideful.

She had a head of golden hair tied up in long ponytails . Her clothing was the so-called goth loli style, and on her upper body she wore a bright red and black checkered vest, but on her lower body she wore a miniskirt patterned with lots of complicated lace and trinkets, with painted leather boots on her feet.

Her strange and gorgeous dress along with the uncoordinated feeling it gave off seemed like a northern island flower in bloom that hid a poisonous venom.

After the girl confirmed that they had arrived, her small mouth chomped a bit of hot dog.

She chewed slowly, using her free hand to snap rudely .

The man's figure disappeared along with it.

Harutora's eyes widened, but he hadn't seen wrongly. In the place the man vanished - approximately where his heart had been - appeared a small paper slip.

The paper's shape was like a stick figure, with a triangle drawn on the upper portion. This was a shape similar to a doll - a shikigami's vessel, a kind of tool.

"He was a shikigami!?"

Harutora muttered.

According to his poor knowledge, the man just now was a simple man-made type of shikigami, which the practitioner manipulated directly or gave orders to beforehand and had the shikigami act on them.

But, a simple shikigami that looked so much like a human was extremely rare. Touji had seen through the man's identity, but Harutora had completely failed to notice that the man had been a shikigami all along.

The girl looked at the shocked Harutora, making a ' humph' sound of derision.

"What's there to be scared of, you can tell easily, and I even put down a barrier."

After she said that, Harutora also noticed that, indeed, the man's figure had suddenly disappeared, but not a single one of the festival-goers nearby had noticed it. Perhaps this was what the girl was talking about, that a barrier had been placed which imposed some kind of magic that avoided peoples' eyes and ears.

The girl collected the doll with a calm look, putting it into her pocket.

"You, you....."

Who was she? Touji opened his mouth before Harutora had even finished speaking:

"...I saw you in a magazine. You should be the youngest one of the ‘Twelve Divine Generals’, the ' prodigy' Dairenji Suzuka, right?"

Hearing the words Touji said, Harutora was speechless for quite a long time.

...The Twelve Divine Generals? This little girl?

Harutora stared wide-eyed at the girl, who made a 'Oh ?' sound, and seemed willing to face the two of them.

"You're pretty knowledgeable, but it's natural for someone from the Tsuchimikado family to know that kind of thing. Right, I'm Dairenji Suzuka."

The girl - Suzuka - spoke, showing a provocative gaze as she looked at Touji.

"Hello and nice to meet you, I heard rumors about you , and I've wanted to meet you for a long time."

Her gaze was intimate, but Touji hid his expression with a calm smile.

Then, he shrugged slightly.

"Unfortunately, I'm just a normal person, and he's the Tsuchimikado."

"Huh? This guy?"

Suzuka blinked strongly, and then frowned, staring at Harutora with a confused expression, sizing him up.

She had even used 'you' when she had spoken with Touji, but she called Harutora 'this guy'. Harutora felt unhappy, and returned Suzuka's gaze wordlessly. [9]

Looking at her like this, she really looked like a middle-schooler. Regardless of the short choker wrapped around her neck or the vest that showed her shoulders, she gave off a weak and powerless feeling. In particular, her clothing and her arrogant attitude seemed like a child pretending to be an adult.

Looking more carefully, a heap of takoyaki, candied apples, and bagged cotton candy was stuffed into the plastic bag that hung from her elbow. She also chewed on a hot dog in her mouth, and it looked as if she were a child buying things willy-nilly without any planning.

But, this girl had indeed been the one manipulating the simple shikigami just now. No, if she truly was one of the Twelve Divine Generals, a simple shikigami was nothing to her, after all, she was one of the Onmyouji with the highest ranked power in Japan.

"Hmph, so it's you..... That's really a bit unexpected. I heard that you were the last prodigy since me, but at first

glance it doesn't seem like you're much of anything. That rumor couldn't have been fake, could it....."

The way Suzuka expressed her emotions was quite direct, and she seemed extremely dejected, speaking bluntly.

"......Hey, what 'prodigy' are you--"

Harutora felt irritated, and was about to pursue the topic, but Touji suddenly put his hand on Harutora's shoulder.

"Alright, calm down. So that means your fame is well-known throughout the industry, right, Natsume?"

"Huh? ...Ah."

Harutora was surprised, looking at Touji. Touji winked at him.

...I see, she.....

Suzuka had mistaken Harutora for Natsume. With that , the question of why her shikigami had called out to an obvious student like Harutora - the question Touji had raised just now - was solved. It had said she was looking

for someone from the Tsuchimikado family, but it hadn't said that the person it was looking for was Tsuchimikado Natsume.

"Whatever, whether the rumor was true or not, I can't give you any leeway."

Suzuka spoke and began striding away, showing an attitude as if Harutora and Touji should obviously follow .

Harutora took the opportunity to hurriedly discuss with Touji in a whisper.

"......She doesn't know that Natsume's a girl?"

"......Seems like it, she even said it was her first time meeting her."

"......Should we let her continue being mistaken? She's one of the Twelve Divine Generals, you know."

"It's her own mistake."

Touji replied, his attitude leisurely like normal.

Harutora felt like things weren't very good. Just then, Suzuka turned around, asking "What are you guys doing sneakily?" with a sharp tone. Harutora gave Touji a look, saw that his eyes were indeed expressing 'go on with it', and sighed lightly.

He followed Suzuka.

".....Do you have business with Nat..... with me?"

"That's stupid, why else would I need to come from Tokyo to this kind of rural place."

Suzuka walked forward without turning around, replying with a arrogant attitude.

"But, it's good that I set down a search net. The Tsuchimikado mansion definitely has a heap of annoying barriers, and I was thinking about how to call you out, but I never thought that I'd run into you in this kind of shabby rural festival. How fortunate I am."

Suzuka laughed loudly. Maybe this was good fortune for her, but it was extraordinarily bad for Harutora. But, that kind of thing happened often.

"......Sorry, you seem like you're having some pretty good fun even though this is just a shabby rural festival."

"Sh, Shut up! This is my first time at a festival, so it's very novel. This is just intellectual curiosity, got a problem!?"

She seemed to be planning on verbal intimidation, but unfortunately her cheeks were red. Maybe she had just come to this place to look around the festival.

Was this girl really one of the Twelve Divine Generals? Harutora showed a doubtful look, and he looked at Touji by his side, but Touji was hiding his expression like before, focused on watching the girl.

"......So? What did you find me for?"

"A small thing, I wanted you to participate in my experiment, and help me with something."

"Experiment? What experiment?"

"Well, that....."

Suzuka stalled, and took a step forward once she recomposed herself.

"I~ am a prodigy in the field of magic, but because I'm still young, right now almost all of the research departments are closed to me. Though that doesn't matter."

She chewed the hot dog, like she were having a chat.

"......So?"

"My research topic is actually an aspect of Tsuchimikado Yakou's Onmyoudou."

Harutora went speechless for a while upon hearing this.

That name was taboo among the Tsuchimikado family - No, among the entire Japanese magical community.

"Modern magic has a huge discrepancy with the magic before Yakou, you obviously know that, right?"

"D, Discrepancy?"

Harutora was dumbfounded by the sudden question. Unlike Natsume herself, Harutora was an outsider to magic.

But, Suzuka didn't pay attention to Harutora's reaction .

"It's that in magical 'techniques', we exclude religious denominations."

Harutora replied with an ambiguous sound: "Uh....."

On the other hand, Touji seemed more surprised by that explanation.

"Religious denomination? Not simplification and popularization?"

Suzuka heard Touji's response, and laughed with disdain.

"Hahaha, is that the answer in the textbooks? Right, that was also a major feature, but the most important factor for forming this feature was the 'Exclusion of religious denomination'. Only by completely cutting ties between magic and religion were we able to make the mystic causality-warping property of magic. This was a big leap for the future development of magical techniques."

Suzuka looked back at the two with a fully satisfied expression. As expected of one qualified to be a 'National First-Class Onmyouji', she spoke eloquently with a tone filled with confidence.

"But." Suzuka continued explaining. "On the other hand, doing this also caused one of the important goals of magic - the techniques and methodology of a 'certain faction' - to be excluded from the systems..... Do you know what it was?"

Suzuka asked again. Harutora had long since surrendered, and Touji didn't speak this time either, waiting for the answer.

Suzuka stopped walking, facing them again.

Just then, her look that seemed like it was joking around became abnormally grim, and her eyes became fierce as if she wanted to pierce them with her sharp gaze .

"Soul magic, having to do with the existence of souls and the world after death." She said with a solemn tone.

"Soul..... magic?"

Harutora couldn't speak for a while, and a sharp light also flashed across Touji's eyes.

Just then, the faint sound of an explosion rang out from the distance.

First, there was a heavy 'Boom!' tearing through the air , and immediately after, a 'Bang' that shook the atmosphere, and giant flowers of flame began blooming in the sky.

Fireworks.

Colors such as red, green, yellow, and blue bloomed gloriously amidst the backdrop of the black night sky. The festival-goers who had originally been checking out the booths all raised their heads, cheering.

Applause and cheers regularly sounded amidst the praise. The light of the fireworks illuminated the ground, casting fantastic and beautiful shadows.

Suzuka stared at the night sky in a trance, just like the spectators.

This was her first time at a festival, and it seemed like it was her first time seeing fireworks.

"......Hu, huhu, they're pretty gorgeous....."

Her tone was harsh, but her eyes were affixed to the fireworks, not far from Hokuto's reactions earlier. Her appearance had flipped from her high-and-mighty attitude just now to an age suitable for her - No, even younger.

...What was this child up to?

Harutora felt distraught for some reason.

There was a huge difference between her appearance as she gazed at the fireworks and the frightening expression she had shown just earlier, and Harutora felt it incredulous. In particular, this girl had mentioned soul magic and then the world after death, which brought no sense of reality at all, just bursts of foreboding.

The fireworks shone, dropping silver and gold threads like rain.

Harutora coughed dryly, and Suzuka hurriedly composed herself.

"A, Anyways." She quickly recovered her stability, continuing to speak as if nothing had happened: "The ' Modern Onmyoudou' I just mentioned doesn't mean ' General'. In the system of 'General Onmyoudou', which can be said to be a synonym for modern magic, there is no magic related to souls or the world after death."

"......What about it?"

"What?" Harutora asked, and Suzuka quickly made a questioning sound, frowning.

"Are you too stupid? Didn't I just tell you my research topic? Simply put, the Onmyoudou that Tsuchimikado Yakou completed isn't what we see right now."

"Huh, but--"

Harutora was about to ask, but Touji interrupted him again.

"Isn't the Onmyoudou that Yakou created the current widely used 'General' style?"

Touji asked Harutora's question first. Maybe he had considered that Suzuka was mistaking Harutora for Natsume, and if Harutora asked too many easy questions , he might let it slip.

Within his expectations, Suzuka quickly showed an arrogant expression towards him.

"Outsiders are so unknowledgeable! Listen, never mind the basic concepts for now, the Onmyoudou that Yakou developed is different from 'General', it's not as simple as 'General', but it's more complex, and it's the much more vast original! The 'General' left behind now are the scraps used by Yakou's successors to compensate for their powerlessness, and they streamlined it, making it into residue, at best an 'easy to understand' Onmyoudou."

Suzuka raged, but the hint of a smile flitted across her face.

It was a derisive smile, carrying a cold disdain for the world. The smile on the girl's face seemed particularly unfitting under the night sky lit by the fireworks.

"Think about it, at the time Yakou accepted the military's request to create a new Onmyoudou, and had to complete it in an incredibly short time, so naturally something complex, undocumented, and incomprehensible would be produced in the process, a giant shadow that the current Onmyoudou can't even compare to, containing a strength far stronger. What he - Tsuchimikado Yakou - created was 'Imperial Onmyoudou'."

The fireworks flashed over the girl's head. Harutora held his breath, looking at the girl before him.

He felt that Suzuka's small body gave off a devilish presence, and couldn't help but doubt whether he was a spirit-seer, that he might be seeing a ghost. An inexplicable chill and tremble silently shot through his whole body.

Finally, she threw down these words:

"Of course, magic related to souls is included among it, and mysterious magic that has already been lost."

...This person.....

Harutora finally understood completely, the girl in front of him - this girl younger than him who looked weak and powerless - was definitely an 'Onmyouji'. This had nothing to do with the gorgeous clothes she wore and her arrogant demeanor - she indeed possessed ' strength'.

He swallowed.

"You said just now that you wanted me to help with an experiment, right? In other words, that....."

Harutora spoke to confirm, and Suzuka nodded her head leisurely.

"Right, I want you to help me carry out soul reincarnation magic at my hands. But you don't need to be afraid, as long as you obediently follow my instructions, you won't be harmed."

Her words were clearly not a request, but an order, and could even be said to be a threat. In Suzuka's mind, the assistance of Harutora - more accurately, Natsume - had already been decided.

But, he still had a doubt in his heart.

"......I, I mostly understand what you're saying. But why do you need Na- need my help? Since you're one of the Twelve Divine Generals, you should be able to find the help of other, more excellent Onmyouji, right?"

However prodigal Natsume was, at best she was just a student. Anyone who had become a National First-Class Onmyouji could utilize specialized Onmyouji to his or her heart's content.

Suzuka's response to Harutora's direct question was very strange.

Her look turned cold for a moment.

"......I'm not in the mood to play around, are you going to keep playing dumb?"

"W, What did you say?"

"There's only one reason I chose you, and it's because of your 'previous life'."

"Wha....."

Harutora didn't understand what Suzuka was saying, and just felt a chill, inadvertently closing his mouth. Beside him, Touji showed a rarely-seen grim expression.

Fireworks intertwined gorgeously in the night sky, each one lighting up the ground, switching the world between light and darkness with blinding speed.

"The next Tsuchimikado heir, Tsuchimikado Natsume. "

Suzuka narrowed her eyes, staring at the speechless Harutora, and slowly spoke:

"It seems like the outside sources were right, you don't seem to have memories of your previous life. Or perhaps, the rumor was fake after all..... But I'll still give it a try, since, after all, you are the successful user of this magic - the 'Taizan Fukun Ritual'."

Suzuka took a step forward, and Harutora felt a deep pressure at the same time as he retreated backwards.

--This person was very dangerous!

Harutora's back was covered in a cold sweat.

Just then.

A shadow cut through the night sky shining with fireworks, flying over to them.

The shadow slipped in through the space between the two of them, ignoring inertia and coming to a halt while still hovering in midair.

It was a dark blue swallow[10].

When Harutora's eyes widened and Touji quickly took up a cautious stance:

"--Stop right there! Dairenji Suzuka, in accordance with Onmyou law, you are under arrest!"

The swallow spoke, and just when its voice had sounded, its body broke open.

Its wings opened wide, the feathers on them shooting out as if exploding, and becoming countless long appendages that reached out like fingers of a hand, trying to wrap around Suzuka.

"This, this is--"

"A binding type!?"

Touji shouted out beside the shocked Harutora.

On the other hand, though Suzuka was being assaulted by the swallow, her lips raised in a shallow and conceited smirk. She 'hmphed' coldly, threw off the plastic bag on her arm, and the tentacles attempting to catch her were blocked in midair.

A distorted human figure emerged from behind her back.

What appeared before them seemed as if it had stepped in from another dimension, two meters tall, with three long arms on either side of its body, a slim monster that seemed to be made of metal.

It was an Asura.[11]

"W, Why are there more shikigami!?"

The shikigami wore a mask on its face with no expression, and it looked more like a machine that had six mechanical arms installed onto it than an organism. A rigid, inorganic shikigami that didn't seem to show any emotion quietly gave off a sense of intimidation.

The shikigami grabbed the swallow's tentacles, tearing them off forcefully. The swallow's form was destroyed, becoming a torn-up talisman - a man-made shikigami type. The shikigami broke up into countless pieces of paper, descending slowly to the ground.

The barrier Suzuka had set down seemed to have been broken, and the festival-goers who noticed the commotion screamed one by one, running in all directions, and the booth managers also hurriedly abandoned their booths, escaping the vicinity.

Harutora and Touji weren't excluded. They put distance between themselves and Suzuka and the shikigami, hiding inside a booth that sold fried noodles.

"That was a man-made shikigami created by the Onmyou Agency. Multipurpose general shikigami model 'M3 Asura'."

Touji - even in this crisis - spoke excitedly.

"What about that swallow?"

"'WA1 Swallow Whip', the binding shikigami produced by the Witchcraft Corporation."

"I wasn't asking about that, I wanted to know who was manipulating it!"

Just as Harutora asked, the controllers immediately appeared.

"Stop right there! We've already blockaded the surroundings, surrender now!"

Ten men wearing jackets or suits appeared before them, and they attempted to encircle Suzuka, aiming the guns they held at her. Among them, there were also some who held talismans in their hands.

Harutora and Touji hid themselves under the iron frying station.

"What's going on!?"

"Are they Mystical Investigators?"

Touji spoke calmly next to the panicking Harutora.

Harutora also knew about Mystical Investigators - they were the investigators of magical crimes. As their name expressed, they were tasked with investigating magic-users who had committed crimes as well as

outlaw Onmyouji, experts at anti-personnel magic. Viewing the exorcists as the firemen or rescue workers of the magic community, the Mystical Investigators were the police.

"But, why would the Mystical Investigators be doing such a thing? Isn't that person one of the Twelve Divine Generals? Aren't they comrades?"

During Harutora's confusion, the Mystical Investigators had already surrounded Suzuka without leaving a gap.

They steamed with killing intent, and it was impossible to tell that this group of adults was dealing with a middle-school aged girl.

Suzuka began collecting her arrogant expression.

"......You guys are really very annoying. Why is it a new batch of people, and also all small fries like before. Your group really can't learn."

Suzuka talked back sarcastically, and the 'Asura' shikigami waited behind her back.

But, the Mystical Investigators weren't offended.

"Dairenji Suzuka, though you are a National First-Class Onmyouji, you don't have any fighting experience. Though my subordinates lost to you in the Onmyou Agency building, did you think you could escape from the hunt of the Mystical Investigator Second Team? We will shoot, so don't resist meaninglessly!"

Several binding 'Swallow Whip' shikigami circled in the air, and the gunpoint warning didn't seem like a joke. Harutora's face turned green, and Touji whistled lightly.

However.

"Did I say I was going to run? Don't make me laugh."

Saying this, Suzuka leisurely put her hand in her pocket, taking out a book.

The girl's actions led to the Mystical Investigators reacting, and they moved. They chanted incantations, casting out charms. It was the wood symbol of one of the five elements.

The thrown charms took in the practitioners' magical power, wriggling and becoming a net of thorns. Asura immediately moved forward to protect its master, but

couldn't block the thorns from wrapping around its body , and its movements were stopped in seconds.

With that, Suzuka lost her protection for a moment. But, taking advantage of the time that Asura had brought her, the young Divine General had already prepared countermeasures.

With both hands, she raised the book she had taken from her pocket. It was a hardcover book of approximately normal size - a scripture with a blood-red cover.

"Don't you think it's uninteresting to have a mass-produced manmade shikigami as your opponent? It's a good chance to let you meet a special shikigami of a Divine General--"

"Arise." She summoned the shikigami.

An evil smile emerged on Suzuka's face as she spoke to the Mystical Investigators.

In the next moment, light that drowned out the fireworks in the night sky burst from the scripture in her hand. The blood-red cover flipped open by itself as if blown by a strong wind, and the pages turned with a

noise. The pages were torn out one by one, flying through the air.

The pages dancing through the air folded, joined together, and overlapped, forming shapes.

There were lions, snakes, eagles, and leopards.

These animals were modeled like vivid origami, but their sizes were about the same as the real things, and they were full of vigor, as if they were true animals.

These animals giving off a menacing air were shikigami.

"...Go."

Suzuka gave a short command - The shikigami followed her order.

There were more than fifty shikigami.

"What the hell--!?"

Harutora's and Touji's faces went pale, and they jumped underneath the iron counter. The big group of shikigami quickly headed towards the festival booths, leaping over the counter, and continuing to run.

It seemed like an avalanche of paper spreading radially outwards with Suzuka as the center. The booths toppled, lanterns fell, and food was trampled underfoot. As the lights were smashed one by one, when it seemed like the surroundings would sink into darkness, fire spread to the knocked-over booths, and tongues of flame danced with the wind, mixing with the fireworks in the night sky.

The Mystical Investigators retreated one by one and counterattacked.

Fire.

The shikigami that were shot trembled and stopped moving, as if encountering radio interference, and their contour blurred and their figure flashed as the vessel that was their core fell apart.

This was the phenomenon known as ‘lag'. Shikigami - especially man-made ones - couldn't endure physical impacts.

But, the 'lag' would only make the shikigami stop for a short period of time. The Mystical Investigators called forth various shikigami, but these shikigami were overwhelmed just guarding their own masters. Some of

the Mystical Investigators among them used charms to create flames, burning the shikigami, but just burning one or two shikigami wouldn't resolve the crisis before them.

"How did we get involved in a magical war?"

"As expected of Harutora, unfortunate to a shocking degree."

"Me? It's my fault!?"

Touji had headed into danger out of curiosity, but now leisurely put the blame on Harutora.

Speaking of which, they really couldn't joke around with situation before them, and they faced a tense situation of life and death.

"What's wrong, everyone? Since you can't win with shikigami, maybe you should try charms?"

Suzuka teased the Mystical Investigators' shameful appearance, laughing loudly while drawing out a talisman from her pocket.

"This is perfect, since it's pretty hot today."

She laughed, tossing out the charm in her hand.

It was a charm of one of the five elements - water.

The charm glowed, gushing out a large quantity of water. If the shikigami had been an avalanche, this time was a flood.

"Wah--"

Harutora and Touji were also engulfed in the flood, and their yelling mouths were filled with water, making breathing difficult as they flailed their arms and legs. But, they weren't wet at all. This wasn't true water, but water created by magic.

"B, Block the rampaging spirit of water! Earth conquers water, Order!"

Several Mystical Investigators struggled in the water, fighting back with charms.

They stamped on earth-element charms, and the ground quickly swelled blocking the water flow, as the magically-created water simultaneously also flowed into the ground.

All of the Mystical Investigators threw out their charms simultaneously, finally conquering the water. In that period of time, Suzuka just snickered, her shikigami completely unaffected by the flood. Even an outsider could tell at a glance that the Mystical Investigators were the underdog.

...She, she was too powerful.....!

Harutora was from a Tsuchimikado branch family, and had also experienced true magic several times, but this was his first time seeing such large-scale magic with his own eyes. Just like the broadcast yesterday, the Twelve Divine Generals really were an extraordinary group within specialized Onmyouji.

".....The situation's bad! Harutora, let's find an opportunity to escape!"

"G, Got it!"

Harutora approved Touji's proposal without further ado.

Though that were the case, flying would be easier than escaping this place. He could see that Touji seemed to be seriously observing the situation around him, and

actually he was desperately searching for a way to escape .

So--

"I'll see you later, Touji."

"Wha--"

Harutora left the surprised Touji, rushing out of the booth.

Touji called out to him from behind, but he ignored it. Suzuka's target was Natsume, and she believed Harutora was Natsume. The chance of Touji successfully escaping was high if the two of them didn't stay together.

He dashed between the booths, dodging through the gaps between shikigami, forcing himself to move.

Touji didn't follow, and that was natural. In this kind of situation, even pursuing Harutora would be to no avail. It would be more helpful to escape and call for help . Touji submitted to that judgment, but of course, there was anxiety and remorse in his heart.

"Ah!"

In order to dodge a falling booth, Harutora bumped into a shikigami shaped like a buffalo. He rapidly avoided the buffalo's horns, but he still crashed into the buffalo's back, falling on the ground.

Once he fell, he was almost brutally trampled by a horse-shaped shikigami. He hurriedly leaped out of the way, and a wolf-shaped shikigami charged past him with its fangs open. He broke out in a cold sweat, escaping unharmed by a hair's breadth.

Suzuka's shikigami seemed to only see the Mystical Investigators and their shikigami as enemies, and had attacked him by coincidence, but at the same time they didn't care about not harming him.

...In any case, for now.....!

Harutora hid in the shadows, and Suzuka seemed to have not noticed him amidst the magic battle. If the magic battle went on, maybe not only Touji, but even he might be able to smoothly escape.

Unfortunately, things didn't go as he wanted. He suddenly stopped.

Behind the toppled booth...

Two children who hadn't escaped in time were squatting there.

"Hey, you two!"

The children heard Harutora's voice, and raised their heads. They were a small boy and a younger girl. Harutora made a sound of surprise. They were the pair of siblings who had happily cheered when Hokuto was blowing bubbles.

The siblings seemed like they remembered Harutora, or maybe they were just too tense, and they rushed out to Harutora from their hiding place in the corner of the booth.

Just then--

"Idiots, avoid it!"

The moment the siblings rushed out of the booth, a giant bear-shaped shikigami leaped over the toppled booth.

Harutora mustered his energy and charged forward. The sister noticed the danger and screamed, and simultaneously stumbled and fell onto the ground. The brother's face went pale, and by the time he thought of rescuing his sister, the shikigami's shadow had already fallen over her.

He couldn't make it.

Harutora was planning to use his body to protect the two siblings, but in spite of everything, the descending shikigami turned back into paper without warning, becoming flakes of paper that lightly floated down onto the girl's head.

Not only that, the other shikigami all also returned to paper - shapes formed by the scripture. The Mystical Investigators seemed to feel that the scene before them was unexpected, and a moment of silence enveloped the area.

"......Wh, Why?" Harutora's eyes widened, and he mumbled quietly - At the time, he had heard Suzuka snarl a word.

He turned around to look behind him, noticing that Suzuka was staring in his direction - but Harutora wasn't in her eyes, it was those siblings that were motionless on the ground, stunned.

--That person.

She had saved the siblings, right? Harutora felt that it was a bit impossible, but just then, his arms were suddenly held back from behind and he was raised in midair.

"What's going on!?" He turned around to look in shock . The multipurpose shikigami Asura that Suzuka had called for at the start was behind him, holding him up.

"This is no fun, let's be done with it."

Saying this, Suzuka threw out a water-element charm again.

This time, fog appeared instead of a flood. He couldn't see a foot in front of him, as if the thick, milky fog had momentarily stolen everyone's vision.

The Mystical Investigators shouted out loudly.

"--Ah!"

Asura carried Harutora, leaping upwards out of the spreading fog. The fog extended outwards below him. How high up. He could see the numerous booths as well as the vast shrine at a glance. "Bang." A firework burst above his head, the last firework he would see for a while .

"This way."

He turned his head towards the sound, and Suzuka was also in the air, riding another beast-like shikigami that she had probably summoned.

After confirming that it was Suzuka, Asura quickly leaped even higher.

They leaped up into the sky, then descended. Asura seemed to not understand flying, and just jumped here and there carrying the yelling Harutora, constantly accelerating towards the ground. The shikigami Suzuka rode glided beside Asura, continuing to advance.

They gradually approached the forest inside the shrine area, crossed the branches, and flew inside.

They landed.

The intense shock struck his body. Intense 'lag' reactions emerged in the shikigami, and it slumped kneeling on the ground.

Asura was a general shikigami that could perform a variety of commands, but this kind of repeated jumping wasn't in its functions, and it had only been able to make this leaping motion after its master Suzuka had poured strong magical energy into it.

"Ah, ahahaha....."

Asura had landed in the most remote corner of the shrine, on the opposite side of the riverbank.

On one side was the stone wall that encircled the border, and on the other side was a forest. The stone wall was about the same distance as the forest. This place was quite far from the road they had paid a visit to earlier, and the ground was covered with weeds growing helter-skelter.

Harutora held still as Suzuka leisurely descended, riding the shikigami.

She jumped off the shikigami's back.

"Don't just stand there, we're going soon, those people will definitely keep chasing."

"W, W, Wait a minute, my head is still spinning....."

"What? How pathetic. Are you truly the next heir of the Tsuchimikado family?"

Suzuka mercilessly showed a scornful look. 'No.' How relaxing would it be if he replied like that. No, once he said such a thing, he would definitely be abandoned here , and maybe she would be mad enough to kill him once she noticed she had been tricked.

But.

"H, hey....."

"What? I'm warning you, you can't refuse--"

"Did you abandon the fight just now to save those two kids?"

Suzuka pressed her lips together.

Harutora looked closely at her, and she made an impatient snarl as if challenging him.

"What kind of question are you asking? That doesn't have anything to do with you."

Suzuka retorted, but it definitely was an obvious response, and her anger was to hide her embarrassment, a simple attitude befitting her age.

"And come to think of it, you don't even have a charm on you? You were just scurrying around just now. You have no strength to save anyone, you're too presumptuous about your strength!"

"......So you saved them for me, to rescue me?"

"...Well."

Suzuka went silent again. A series of questions came forth in Harutora's mind when he saw her demeanor.

Suzuka was one of the Twelve Divine Generals, but was being hunted by the Mystical Investigators. Mystical Investigators mostly hunted magic-related criminals. In other words, she had committed a crime - or was preparing to commit a crime.

Connecting that supposed crime and the soul magic she had talked about just now, she had definitely borne quite a few risks to experiment with this magic.

".....Let me ask you, what are you planning to do with soul magic?"

Harutora was still bound by Asura.

But he still stared straight into Suzuka's eyes, asking the question directly.

Suzuka's face went red for a bit. She had originally planned on showing a similar attitude to before and retorting, but facing Harutora's gaze, her parted lips gradually lost their energy.

The gaze with which she stared at Harutora changed, like how she had looked at the siblings earlier.

The look of an innocent girl.

".....I want to revive my brother."

Suzuka spoke softly.

The sound of fireworks echoed through the forest devoid of people, and Harutora's eyes widened in shock.

"R, Revive..... so....."

What was she talking about? Harutora thought about it, and felt that it was unbelievable. Suzuka ignored his reaction, a scowl returning to her face, and turned her head.

Just then--

"Harutora!"

Harutora's face instantly became ashen.

Suzuka turned around rapidly, and Harutora also turned towards the direction the voice had come from. A girl wearing a yukata rushed into the forest.

It was Hokuto.

Harutora lost his sense of reason.

"Idiot, don't come over here!"

"No! Let Harutora go!"

Hokuto shouted, with a firm will in her eyes showing how anxious she was to save Harutora, seeming like she didn't even notice the figure of the shikigami.

Then--

".....Harutora?"

Suzuka's cheeks trembled, staring viciously at Harutora. "Ah." Harutora uttered a sound of surprise, realizing.

".....What's going on? You aren't Tsuchimikado Natsume?"

"No, well....."

"Answer me!"

Suzuka was extremely forceful. Since Hokuto was here , being vague would only increase the danger.

".....N, Natsume is my relative. I'm Tsuchimikado Harutora, a branch family member."

"B, Branch family? What are you spewing! Don't joke around!"

She grabbed the restrained Harutora's chest, clenching her teeth.

"You're lying!"

"No, well, you made the mistake first."

"Shut up, you vermin! I'll kill you!"

Suzuka had truly raged, and the thin arm grabbing Harutora's chest couldn't stop trembling in anger.

Hokuto hurriedly ran over.

"Don't come here, ugly! If you come here, I'll kill him!"

Hokuto stopped moving upon hearing Suzuka's angry howl, but she didn't give up, waiting for an opportunity to get close, as could be told from her expression in a glance.

Hokuto didn't know Suzuka's true identity, nor had she seen the magic battle just now with her own eyes, nor should she know what kind of thing Asura was.

Harutora worried more because he was familiar with Hokuto's unyielding personality.

On the other hand, Suzuka pulled at Harutora's chest, unmoving.

She seemed like she was still mad yet simultaneously thinking about what step to take next. Even if her anger hadn't disappeared, she still put her feelings to the side, thinking hard about how to correct this mistake.

After a while, Suzuka relaxed her hands, speaking softly:

".....I was planning to resolve this with peaceful means anyway..... Whatever."

How were her methods from just before peaceful - Just when those words were about to rush out of his throat, Harutora frantically swallowed them back down.

Suzuka slowly gave an order to Harutora, who had no way to resist.

"Warn the real Tsuchimikado Natsume that 'I'm going to find and catch you', got it? Make sure to convey it personally!"

"......Got it."

Suzuka's tone was murderous, and Harutora reluctantly nodded his head.

She stared at Harutora, a bit of anger still smoldering in her eyes. Then, she suddenly glanced at Hokuto.

"......Is that girl your girlfriend?"

"N, No!"

Harutora replied anxiously. It would be terrible if Suzuka took her rage from being tricked out on Hokuto.

"Liar, she doesn't seem like a normal friend from her manner."

"I'm telling the truth! She's just someone who happened to come to the festival with me!"

Harutora refuted her frantically, and Suzuka showed a cold look, staring at him.

Suddenly, a malicious smile emerged on her face.

"I wouldn't lie to you again....."

An icy chill ran through Harutora's back, and he couldn't help but want to call out 'stop'.

He still hadn't called that out, when his chest was suddenly pulled forcefully at the same time as Suzuka's face approached rapidly.

A soft sensation touched his lips.

Harutora's eyes widened, and Hokuto gasped.

Suzuka just closed her eyes, moving her arms around his neck like she wanted to hug Harutora's head, 'Nn.....' quietly letting out a deep breath.

After she slowly and deliberately kissed Harutora, she let him go.

Then, Asura also released its hand, and Harutora's body tumbled to the ground accordingly.

Suzuka showed a smile, looking at Harutora who was kneeling on the ground. Then, she and Asura got on the beast shikigami together and flew into the black sky.

She yelled from the air:

"Darling, convey the message properly (got it)?"

After saying this, she soared off into the firework-lit night sky.

All that was left was a sensation on his lips.

As she left, she directed a malicious wink at Hokuto.

Hit first, ask questions later - Harutora expected that sort of situation to arise, but who could have known what would happen next.

He shook his head, wiped his face, and ran towards Hokuto.

"Hokuto, are you alright?"

After Suzuka's shikigami had disappeared, Hokuto had stayed petrified on the ground, as if her soul had

been stolen away. Even so, he couldn't be careless. Harutora predicted - actually, expected - that Hokuto would turn into a demon the next second, roaring angrily : 'You big pervert!'

Unfortunately, he had guessed wrongly.

Hokuto slowly turned around towards Harutora who was rushing towards her.

Then, she suddenly began crying.

"H, Hokuto?"

Harutora's voice went hoarse. Hokuto didn't stop crying, silently dripping tears, then sobbed, and then finally began weeping loudly. This made Harutora completely distressed.

"H, Hokuto? What's wrong? Are you hurt? Or were you scared? No, anyway, it's alright, she's already gone. Calm down, alright?"

Harutora hovered helplessly back and forth in front of Hokuto. Fireworks still bloomed in the night sky, and the flying sparks and light from the fireworks descended to the earth like a summer afternoon shower.

Under the brilliant light of the fireworks--

"Harutora, you idiot!"

Hokuto finally spoke.

She sobbed, speaking in bits:

"That's too much, Harutora..... You threw my ema on the ground, and didn't chase after me..... And Touji even sent me a message..... I waited, but you didn't come. Then a commotion happened, and you were wrapped up in it..... I, I even thought it would be fine once I saw Touji was alright, but I didn't think he would say you had been taken away....."

"Y, You saw Touji?"

"Yes! That's why I was so worried..... I was worried to death, and chased after you like mad, wanting to save you! But then what? Why were you kissing with that girl! I really misjudged you. That's too much, it's really too much! Uuu....."

Hokuto sobbed loudly, standing on the ground, gasping for breath, not even wiping the tears overflowing from her eyes.

She opened her mouth, crying painfully again.

Harutora did nothing.

"Harutora, you big idiot! I hate you, I don't care..... Uu ..... I don't care about you....."

"S, Sorry, I made you worry, I'm really sorry."

"What..... Uu..... What apology, you don't even understand other people's feelings..... Uu..... Y, You even kissed....."

"She was deliberately teasing me just now! Didn't you also see? Also, you weren't the one who was kissed forcefully, it was me, why are you the one crying?"

Harutora's brain had trouble functioning in front of the sobbing Hokuto, and the moment those last words left his mouth, Hokuto's crying face distorted in pain.

She reached out her hands, pushing Harutora. Harutora staggered, looking at Hokuto in shock.

"Bakatora!"

Hokuto opened her mouth to yell:

"Who would be happy watching the person they like kissing someone else! Do you know how painful, how lonely, how difficult that feeling is!"

Bang - A bright firework loomed in the night sky.

The rain of light illuminated Hokuto brightly.

Harutora became speechless for a while, standing frozen in place.

Hokuto's eyes, filled with tears, stared at Harutora.

Her red eyes, her tear-filled eyes, with a strong and clear light shining from their depths.

The Hokuto just then was the most beautiful girl he had seen in his life.

Hokuto muttered, as if trying to hold back her tears. She covered her face with the hem of the yukata, wiping away the tears, and then turned around, running away from Harutora.

"--H, Hokuto!"

Harutora chased, but he was afraid he would stumble and fall if he pursued her, and was unable to sprint with his full strength.

Hokuto's back disappeared into the forest.

Harutora stood alone, the fireworks blooming above his head and then disappearing.

Chapter 3 - Armored Demon Soldier

Part 1

The Onmyouji commotion in the fireworks festival that evening quickly made the news.

There had been an increasing trend this year of magical crimes nationwide, but the majority of them were resolved 'internally' and most citizens knew nothing about them. On one hand, this situation showed the excellence of the Onmyou agency, but on the other hand it was proof that the scope of Onmyouji activity - other than activities related to repelling spiritual disasters - was basically outside the framework of ordinary society.

Current Onmyoudou was based on techniques invented for battles, and because of this their use had heavy restrictions. Other than some with exceptional convenience and versatility, most had extremely limited useful contributions to society.

Like spiritual disasters, current Onmyoudou was the heritage left behind by Yakou. Regardless of how limited and controlled it was, Onmyoudou - as well as Onmyouji

- would occasionally run amok, becoming fierce and unruly. The event that happened this time could be said to be a typical such situation.

Two hours after it happened, the Onmyou Agency and the local police collectively held a press conference. In the press conference it was reported that there were many who had suffered minor wounds and none had received serious wounds or died, and a statement was issued saying that the Mystical Investigator Second Team was currently on the hunt for the criminal, and also that aid had been dispatched to their destination.

The media questioned the Onmyou Agency's oversight , but the representatives at the press conference stated that they were mending the situation with full force. Afterwards, these representatives took the reporters' questions without expressing a bit of hesitation, beginning with a firm statement that they would definitely capture the criminal.

There was only one question that was an exception.

When the reporter asked what suspect had led to this case, the Onmyou Agency representative paused for several seconds before giving a short answer.

"A researcher."

Part 2

The firework festival had been the day before, and the sky was gray and hazy, completely lacking the beautiful weather from yesterday.

A typhoon seemed to be gradually approaching, and its effects were expected to be the greatest from the evening until daybreak. Thick clouds filled with moisture were right around the corner, and the wind was picking up, mercilessly blowing around the hair of pedestrians.

At eleven in the morning, before lunchtime, in an empty fast food store...

Harutora and Touji sat by the second-floor window.

Summer remedial classes were still held as usual on this kind of day, but today they had been released from school very early. They sat on the cheap chairs, looking at each other across the table with a heavy atmosphere that didn't lose to the weather.

"So--"

Touji fingered his bandanna, staring at Harutora.

"You haven't reached Hokuto after that?"

"......Right, I sent her a text message but didn't get a response, and she didn't pick up the phone."

"But you confirmed that she was completely okay."

"......At the least, she was like that when I saw her last."

Harutora replied, his gaze beginning to move away from Touji.

Touji raised his head, looking as if everything had been wrapped up.

"Then that's alright."

He said that, and then reached his hand out to the iced coffee on the table.

"That was really a stormy night, and the typhoon hadn't even arrived yet."

"....."

Harutora lowered his head with nothing to say.

Indeed, last night had been an appalling night. Even if Harutora believed that his luck was definitely worse than others, last night could be called the worst night of his life.

First he had fought with Hokuto, and then been mistaken for someone else, threatened by a Divine General, and even involved in a magic battle, and finally had a nightmarish - and his life's first - kiss, and had been happened upon by Hokuto, who confessed to him while sobbing. He really wanted to yell 'what did I do wrong?'

...Hokuto.....

Hokuto's sobs still resounded in Harutora's ears.

He didn't know much about love. Actually, even after a night, he still didn't know how to look at Hokuto's confession.

Harutora obviously liked Hokuto, but those feelings were different from love. Hokuto's manner of speaking

was like a boy's and Harutora had naturally come to think of her as a male friend.

...No, it seems like it's a bit different.

Thinking back on it now, he hadn't seriously thought about whether the 'like' he had towards Hokuto was love or not. Whether intentionally or not, he hadn't tried unraveling the truth because he had been satisfied with his situation.

At the least, things had been that way until yesterday.

...What about now?

He asked himself, but he had no way of easily getting the answer. Unfortunately, his brain wasn't very good, and the more he thought about himself and Hokuto, the more he felt like his brain was a big mess, and the answer gradually became hazy.

All he knew was that he didn't want to lose Hokuto.

Because of the scene from yesterday night, the relationship between the two of them might change in the future. Regardless of what change happened, he wanted Hokuto to still be with him.

That mood was completely genuine.

...Yeah.

Harutora raised his head, shifting his thoughts to something else.

He hadn't spoken about the kiss or Hokuto's confession to Touji, just brushing over it, and telling Touji that Hokuto arrived, which led to his identity being exposed, and Suzuka released him because of it, and then he and Hokuto had fought, and the two of them had split unhappily.

The whole thing had some unreasonable portions, and Touji seemed to be vaguely aware of some novelties. Harutora felt incredibly grateful at the fact that his friend hadn't asked any detailed questions.

".....Never mind Hokuto for now. You haven't reached that childhood friend of yours either?"

"I sent her a text message. She's the same, she didn't reply or pick up the phone."

"That arrogant devil won't let you go easily, and she doesn't seem like she'll be arrested."

"Yeah, I thought so too."

Natsume should have heard about this matter. The news hadn't brought up Suzuka's existence at all, but he had already told her via text message about the warning Suzuka had left behind, but he still wanted to meet with her and explain clearly in person.

Harutora had reunited with Natsume the evening before, but the two of them had disagreed, argued, and because of this, she might not have opened her phone to look at his text messages even though he had sent many of them.

"She shouldn't have returned yet, so I'll go to the main family's place to check later."

Unfortunately, Harutora's parents were away for business, and they were currently in Tokyo, so he couldn't communicate with the main family because of this - no one had answered the main family's phone - and

there wasn't anyone else he could ask for help from. With that, he felt even more that he had to warn Natsume to be vigilant as soon as possible.

"It's better if you went, since, after all, that little devil feels like an unscrupulous individual."

"Unscrupulous, huh....."

Harutora murmured quietly upon hearing Touji's words. Touji looked curiously at Harutora, like he had noticed the sliver of doubt hidden in his voice.

"What is it?"

"Uh..... well....."

With Touji's questioning gaze and the chaotic state of Harutora's thinking, it would be best for him to bring his internal thoughts to light.

"That person - Dairenji Suzuka - when she was dealing with the Mystical Investigators, she had a big advantage, but she suddenly ran away, right? That was actually to keep a pair of kids who hadn't escaped in time from getting involved in the chaos."

-- '.....I want to revive my brother.'

The words Suzuka had spoken last night flashed through Harutora's mind. Maybe she had seen her past self back then in the pair of young siblings who almost got involved.

"She told me she wanted to revive her brother. I didn't believe it was possible, but she wanted to use Natsume to try."

".....Judging by the current situation, that's accurate."

"But....."

"What? Say it, if you have something to say."

Harutora honestly brought up the doubts in his heart.

Of course, he believed that he had to do whatever he could to stop Natsume from getting involved regardless of whether he owed Natsume or not, and he would obviously make every effort once she was in danger - even if it was no use at all - to stop Dairenji's attempt.

It was just that Harutora's eyes had seen the Suzuka that everyone else had, and had also seen her escape

from the fight to help the children, as well as her vague unease as she expressed that she wanted to revive her brother. He didn't know what crimes had led the Mystical Investigators to hunt for her, but he believed that the goal she wanted to achieve - reviving her brother - shouldn't be condemned.

Touji listened, and didn't immediately reply to Harutora's question.

"......Honestly, I also did some investigation afterwards ."

He leaned back in his chair, speaking leisurely:

"First, just like 'General', the 'Imperial Onmyoudou' that brat brought up is often termed 'Imperial'. This ' Imperial' is an ancient magic system that is no longer formally taught. That person also said, though it's ancient, it was used mainly for military purposes, and the majority of it is powerful-strength magic for actual wars. There are quite a few magics among it that are designated as forbidden magics, but some still survived to today."

"Is soul magic included in that?"

"No, that's another matter."

A cold smile flashed across Touji's face, and Harutora tilted his head in incomprehension.

"Is soul magic really that powerful? Isn't interaction with ghosts very much something that an Onmyouji would do?"

"That's a situation from folk tales and legends. At the least, in current magic there are no magics relating to souls. A basic pillar of 'General' is that we 'don't know' whether souls exist."

Touji's explanation surprised Harutora.

"Is that so? But aren't there things like aura and spiritual disasters?"

"Right, and that portion is the so-called gray area. The ' spirits' that 'General' concerns itself with doesn't mean ' spirits' like souls, but the 'flow' that composes everything - or perhaps which everything contains. The 'aura' and ' miasma' we always talk about are that kind of 'flow'. The so-called 'spiritual disasters' are actually disasters brought about by a chaotic 'flow'."

The foundation of Onmyoudou was the 'Onmyoudou five elements', and this doctrine prewar and postwar - the past and current Onmyoudou - interpreted things differently, with large disparities, but it still formed the foundation of Onmyoudou.

"The world is composed of Yin and Yang, and they are further divided into the five flows of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water - I think it would be clearer if you asked your childhood friend about these matters."

Saying that, Touji shrugged his shoulders.

"As for souls, of course humans are included in the things formed by 'flow', and so 'General' recognizes that human bodies possess spirit - they are 'flow'-possessing bodies. What's mixed is that there are also people who call these souls, and among them there are people who talk about residual spirits - it's already been confirmed that for some time after a person dies, the soul continues lingering in the human world, and that kind of thing is actually very much like a ghost."

Touji drank his iced tea, explaining in a torrent. He had originally particularly understood Onmyoudou and the magic community because of what had happened to

his own self, and it seemed that he had also put quite some effort into investigating this time.

"Though 'General' proposes definitions for spirits and residual spirits, it's a different matter once it touches upon 'human souls'. In the end, they don't resolve the question 'what are souls', so it’s impossible to derive magic affecting souls when we 'don't know what souls are'."

"But, Dairenji Suzuka spoke of soul magic--"

"So I'm saying, that's not 'General', that's a magic belonging to 'Imperial'. I investigated this portion especially thoroughly, but unfortunately I didn't get a conclusive result even from the inside."

"W, Why?"

"Maybe many scholars believe soul magic exists within 'Imperial', but there are no records left behind to prove it. Not only that, but current Onmyoudou bans carrying out magical research related to souls."

"Bans?"

"Right, and it's not ethics-based, there are more practical considerations."

Saying this, a sharp grin emerged on Touji's face.

That kind of happy, cold smile was a smile that Touji showed when he was feeling excited. Harutora had a bad premonition.

".....What do you mean by 'practical'?"

"Harutora, you know about the final ceremony Tsuchimikado Yakou performed, right?"

"Huh? I, I know, it was in the textbooks, because the Tsuchimikado family was crowded out, the failure of the ceremony led to spiritual disasters appearing in Tokyo--"

Harutora stopped speaking, noticing the hidden meaning in Touji's words.

Touji looked at Harutora, nodding his head with a cold grin.

"Outsiders seem to believe the ceremony was like that. "

Harutora was speechless.

There actually wasn't any related data left behind regarding Yakou's final ceremony. If it was a magic related to souls, he could understand why research into it was banned, and could also understand why Suzuka was being hunted by the Mystical Investigators, since it would be natural for that to happen. The spiritual disasters that repeatedly happened in Tokyo were a calamity brought about by the ceremony Yakou held.

"......And many Onmyouji believe that Yakou didn't fail ."

"W, Why? Didn't Yakou lose his life because of that ceremony?"

"The Onmyouji who believe Yakou succeeded in his ceremony advocate that 'The prodigy Onmyouji Tsuchimikado Yakou held the final large-scale magic of his career, letting his soul reincarnate'."

"What?"

Harutora gasped.

--Yakou had reincarnated?

This was the first time he had heard about it. As active Onmyouji - Though branch family members, they were still Tsuchimikado - his parents hadn't even spoken of that matter with him, which he found a bit hard to believe.

The true shock was still ahead of him.

Touji looked at the stunned Harutora, composing himself suddenly.

A sharp light shone from his thin eyes.

"Your power of observation is still bad - Harutora, think carefully about that brat's words."

His tone was low and solemn. Harutora's heartbeat quickened.

The words Suzuka had spoken.

She had said.....

...'There's only one reason I chose you, and it's because of your 'previous life'.'

...'It seems like the outside sources were right, you don't seem to have memories of your previous life. Or perhaps, the rumor was fake after all..... But I'll still give it a try, since, after all, you are the successful user of this magic - the 'Taizan Fukun Ritual'.'

"Ah....."

Harutora shuddered, his eyes widening.

Touji stared at Harutora, slowly saying:

".....Your dad probably didn't tell you on purpose. This is quite a famous rumor in the industry. It's said that Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation did not happen at the time when there was a strong feeling of failure from the war, but would come when the Onmyoudou he created was prominent - he would reincarnate into the Tsuchimikado child that would succeed his bloodline. Of course, that kind of thing doesn't have a speck of proof, it's just hearsay."

"Ah....."

Harutora felt blinded, gritting his teeth together.

Natsume was..... Yakou's reincarnation?

He felt that this wasn't real but couldn't feel confident in that denial.

Natsume was indeed gifted, and thinking carefully, it had indeed been decided too early that she would be the next heir. Right now, she obviously wasn't at Yakou's level of Onmyoudou power..... Then was the current Natsume slightly inferior compared to the sixteen-year-old Yakou?

Harutora had heard much news regarding Natsume, but in the end Harutora didn't actually know anything specific about her talent.

Most importantly, Suzuka believed in this rumor. Suzuka, one of the Twelve Divine Generals, a researcher of Yakou, and the one recovering soul magic had judged - Natsume was Yakou's reincarnation.

Could her judgment be wrong?

Harutora couldn't say. Touji was silent and wordless, sipping iced coffee through a straw. A heavy silence pervaded the space between the two.

Just then, Harutora's phone rang.

It was a text message. He reflexively checked the sender.

"Is it Hokuto?" Touji asked keenly.

"No....."

It was a message from Natsume. He hadn't been able to come in contact with Natsume since yesterday night, and when this text message came, it seemed as if she was watching from next to them.

Harutora's fingers pressed the buttons, opening the message. The message's contents were very brief.

'I have something to talk to you about, are you free tonight?'

The first drops of rain before the typhoon lightly splashed against the second-floor window.

Part 3

The rain had started in the afternoon, and gradually grew stronger as time went on.

Natsume met him inside an old cafe. He unfolded his umbrella, rushing into the store, and the entrance bell made a crisp ringing sound.

It was five in the afternoon. A dim light passed through the shade, illuminating the store's rustic-styled interior decorations. Because of the effects of the weather, it was cheerless inside the store. Harutora looked around the store, noticing Natsume in a booth inside.

"Did you wait long?"

"......No, I didn't. Well..... I wanted to apologize to you for calling you out on the day of a typhoon."

"Don't worry, I also wanted to talk to you face to face."

After the two of them greeted each other, the store employee came by to help them order. Harutora randomly picked a cup of iced coffee, but Natsume silently stared at the black tea on the table.

Natsume wore a black chiffon dress, and the mature, fashionable dress was very fitting for her elegant beauty. Her long, jet-black hair didn't seem to have been blown around by the wind at all, and maybe she had ridden a

taxi here. The black tea seemed already cooled, but she didn't even drink a sip.

"....."

He felt tense, as after all, he had just listened to the things Touji had talked about, and also the fight on the bridge two days ago still made him feel uneasy. He had been extremely anxious when he hadn't been able to reach her, but he couldn't say anything once he met her.

...Was she truly Yakou's.....?

Natsume's appearance hadn't changed much from when he saw her two days ago.

...No, that wasn't right.

She wasn't completely unchanged either, and Harutora noticed that there was a discrepancy in Natsume's appearance.

Natsume was usually mature and calm, but today she was inexplicably impatient, sitting uneasily. For some reason her face was red and she refused to look directly

at Harutora. Speaking of which, she had clearly been abnormally tense as well when she had greeted him just now.

What was it? Harutora couldn't help but wonder.

"I looked at the message, I'm sorry."

Natsume suddenly apologized, bowing deeply. Harutora's eyes widened.

"Huh? W, What?"

"It was all my fault, I put you in danger in yesterday's festival."

"W, Wait, why is it your fault?"

"You were found because the other person mistook you for me, right?"

Harutora finally understood why Natsume would apologize when he heard her say this. It was because Harutora had been involved in danger in her place.

"It's alright, you don't need to apologize to me, and more importantly I didn't say things clearly in the

message. It was actually my mistake that that person stayed mistaken, since when that person made her initial mistake, I went with the flow and pretended to be you. In any case, that girl is the most to blame, it's not your fault."

Harutora hurriedly explained, and Natsume concealed her surprise upon hearing that.

"Pretended to be me? Why did you do that?"

"Uh, because that person said she wanted you to cooperate with her experiment, and I wanted to know what she was planning....."

Harutora spoke hesitantly.

"That's really....." Natsume showed a reproachful look for a moment. "You also knew that person was one of the Twelve Divine Generals - A National First-Class Onmyouji, right? You're really too reckless to dare trick her."

"That's why I was so concerned, I felt it was very dangerous....."

"Since you noticed the danger, that's even more reason not to have done that! You're an outsider, and if you get involved in a dispute between Onmyouji, and something happens - Actually, you really did end up in danger, and it's lucky that nothing happened. Your actions are way too reckless!"

Natsume rebuked him, much like a class president berating the nonsense of her classmates. "Sorry....." Harutora apologized to her, downcast.

Harutora had originally planned on stopping the danger before it reached his childhood friend. But, he couldn't retort with anything if one were to reprimand him for biting off more than he could chew. If it were Natsume who was wrapped up in the same crisis, she would definitely be able to deal with it more cleverly.

Seeing Harutora so depressed, Natsume hurriedly shut her mouth.

She lowered her eyes, embarrassed.

".....S, Sorry, you only got involved with this business because of me."

"Didn't I just say, it's not your fault at all."

Harutora brought that up again, but Natsume didn't share his thoughts. She clenched her fists, bringing them close to her knees, her face flushing red and her mouth thinning.

She had been this stubborn since long ago. Harutora clearly realized that she believed that she had to bear the entire burden for this happening.

...An impulsive person.

Harutora muttered secretly. Just then, the iced coffee was sent over, but he didn't have any intention of reaching out for it.

"......You should care about your own safety. Maybe it's not very convincing if I say it, but this Dairenji Suzuka is truly very powerful."

Once Suzuka's name left his mouth, Natsume's head and shoulders suddenly trembled.

"......Yes, I know."

The tone of the reply was far different from her usual.

Harutora was a bit surprised. Her voice sounded like it was even angrier than Harutora himself, who had been caught up in that crisis.

"Do you know each other?"

"Of course I don't know her!"

"Th, Then why are you....."

"Th, That's because..... I, I heard evaluations of her from others. I recognize that she indeed has the power of a National First-Class Onmyouji, but as for her personality - she's an extremely dislikeable girl."

Natsume spoke, her anger spilling over.

Harutora was truly frightened in this moment. It was his first time hearing Natsume belittle someone like this, so this showed how bad of an opinion others had of Suzuka.

But.

"......But, she's the youngest one to attain the rank of ' National First-Class Onmyouji', known as the 'Child Prodigy' Onmyouji. If she found me, I would be helpless. I want to take countermeasures as soon as possible."

"Helpless..... It's the same even if you face her?"

"Of course, the opponent is an Onmyouji possessing power among the top of the nation."

"Ah, yeah, that's true....."

But you're Yakou's - Harutora swallowed those words that he had almost spoken. Natsume's quizzical gaze drifted towards him, and he hurriedly coughed lightly a few times, smoothing things over.

"What will you do specifically? Have you told your family members?"

"No, I haven't..... My father is in Tokyo right now."

"Your dad too? How unfortunate, my family's the same."

"......My father went to Tokyo together with Aunt and Uncle."

"Huh, is, is that so?"

The Aunt and Uncle Natsume spoke of meant Harutora's parents. Harutora didn't know that matter at all, and his face flushed slightly.

"So that's why I returned."

She spoke honestly. Harutora was tongue-tied for a moment, unable to reply with anything.

Natsume's mother had already died, and her father was the only parent left. Before she had gone to Tokyo to study, it had always been the father and daughter together.

Natsume didn't seem to get along that well with her father. Actually, Harutora wasn't too clear on the situation, but he occasionally would hear one or two things from his parents. He had heard that they almost never spoke since they had started living together.

Even so, the current situation was more critical than usual.

"Since our family is all in Tokyo, it would be safer for you to return there as soon as possible."

"I can't....."

"Hey hey, think about your current situation. However bad your relationship with your dad is, doing that is too dangerous."

"No, it's not because of that....."

Once Harutora said this, Natsume seemed perplexed for a moment, looking like she didn't know what to say.

"She..... The 'Child Prodigy' said that she was going to hold the 'Taizan Fukun Ritual', right?"

"Huh? Oh, I didn't hear very clearly..... Could it be that you know what that is?"

"I know."

"Really!? She said it was soul magic, isn't that forbidden? Is it very famous?"

Harutora asked in surprise, and Natsume looked back at him, not expecting that.

"The 'Taizan Fukun Ritual' was originally a ritual held by the Tsuchimikado family."

"......What?"

Those unexpected words stunned Harutora.

Natsume said:

"The Taizan Fukun Ritual originated as a ritual held by Abe no Seimei, the ancestor of the Tsuchimikado family, and afterwards became a national secret held by the Tsuchimikado family for many years. She should be planning on holding the 'Imperial Taizan Fukun Ritual', which has undergone drastic changes, but the two are fundamentally similar."

"S, Similar?"

"Right, in the courtyard behind my home - actually, a good distance away - there is a hill known by us as the ' Imperial Hill', and the altar for the Taizan Fukun Ritual, guarded by generations of the Tsuchimikado family, is there. She will probably hold the ritual there. In that case, as a member of the Tsuchimikado family, I must guard the altar, and so I cannot leave this place."

"What....."

"Holding the Imperial Taizan Fukun Ritual requires taking great risks, and I definitely cannot give her that opportunity."

Great risks. Harutora couldn't help but cringe when he heard that. The 'Imperial Taizan Fukun Ritual' had indeed brought huge spiritual disasters in the past, and Natsume obviously knew that as well.

Though that were so...

"Even so, you can't guard the altar as a one-man army, right? Didn't you also say that you couldn't face a Divine General just now?"

"......It has nothing to do with whether I can do it or not , it's a problem of responsibility. My father is not here right now, so only I can bear the responsibility of guarding the altar."

"Wait, this doesn't solve the problem at all. Since you can't guard it, isn't it the same whether you're there or not?"

"That just means that I did not complete my responsibility as a descendant of the Tsuchimikado family."

Natsume was a bit haughty, proclaiming indignantly. Harutora was distressed but could do nothing.

Maybe this was the mettle of a main family member, but if she couldn't guard the altar in the end, it couldn't count as completing her responsibility, Harutora thought .

On the other hand, because of this, there was even less of a reason to act irresponsibly. It wasn't like he couldn't understand Natsume's stance.

Since she was small, Natsume's sense of justice and sense of duty were stronger than other peoples', and she was the kind of person to seriously proclaim 'sometimes one has to fight battles with no chance of victory'. If he heard her say that kind of thing, Touji would probably laugh coldly in disdain, but Harutora would nod his head to express agreement.

In particular, if Natsume was truly Yakou's reincarnation, the Taizan Fukun Ritual was a rite connected to her fate. If Natsume herself knew that rumor, then it was no wonder she was trying to stop the holding of the Taizan Fukun Ritual however she could.

"Nn....."

Harutora crossed his arms, creased his brow, and stared up at the ceiling.

Then.

"....I know. But, I still need to persuade you to return to Tokyo."

"Harutora-kun, how many times do I have to say it for you to realize, that--"

"Dairenji Suzuka's target is you. Also, the ritual needs you to be carried out, right? Just guarding the altar is meaningless, your safety needs to be guarded just like the altar."

Harutora spoke carefully, and Natsume inadvertently went silent. Her lack of an immediate retort proved that she believed Harutora's words were reasonable.

"But..... If we overlook the altar like that....."

"I'll guard the altar."

Natsume's eyes widened as she heard Harutora speak.

How long had it been since such an expression had appeared on Natsume's face? Normally, she would always wear an ice-cold face like she was slightly angry, but once she was caught off guard, she would show a childish look.

Harutora continued speaking, a bit embarrassed:

"After all, it's dangerous, and since a descendant of the Tsuchimikado has to guard the altar, I'll guard it for you. "

"......You, what are you talking about? You don't know magic....."

"The opponent is a Divine General, and even you don't have a chance of winning, right? In that case, it's the same no matter who guards the altar. Unless you have some way to hold the altar from a Divine General?"

Harutora spoke calmly, and Natsume's lips trembled, speechless.

Natsume was overbearing when it came to strict guidelines, but she was unexpectedly poor at coping with other unexpected attacks, and she was particularly at a loss when she understood the reasoning behind it. That childhood weakness hadn't changed at all when she grew older, and Harutora couldn't help but smile.

"You go evacuate, I'll stay behind to deal with her. With that, not only can we stop Dairenji Suzuka from holding the ceremony, we'll also uphold the responsibility of guarding the altar. We'll see how things turn out. Maybe there's not a high chance of smoothly

guarding the altar, but it's better than ending up with you getting captured if you stay behind to guard the altar ."

"But....."

"Come on, stop worrying. More importantly, you don't have the time to worry about others right now, Dairenji Suzuka is heading towards the altar, and she'll probably try to find you first, so you're in danger too."

After saying this, Harutora took out a leather case fastened to his waist.

It was a commercial box of charms several times larger than a cell phone case, a box that Harutora had picked up from his house before coming here.

He opened the strap on the top of the box, took out the charms inside, and placed them on the table.

"These are healing charms I took from my dad's clinic, and there are also some talismans inside. These are all expensive charms carefully crafted by the Onmyou Agency, and I'm not sure how to use them, but having them should be very convenient for you."

If they clashed with Suzuka face-to-face, the chance of winning was small. But since this situation had gotten on the news, the Onmyou Agency would certainly be thinking of a way to make this crisis subside, and Harutora and Natsume just needed to smoothly escape from Suzuka's grasp.

Just as Harutora was thinking this method could work.

.....

"......Harutora-kun, you're too crafty."

Natsume silently lowered her head and murmured, unable to retort.

"......You only treat yourself as a Tsuchimikado during this kind of time."

Saying this, she raised her head, eyes resentfully staring at Harutora. Her small voice carried a rare awkwardness, different from her normal tone, and it really seemed like a child's anger. Harutora was stunned upon hearing it.

...First she called me a liar, and now said I was crafty.

He felt that he might truly be a crafty person, after hearing her say that. But, it was different from when she had branded him a liar, as Natsume didn't have any intention of blaming Harutora now, and Harutora felt pure joy at the difference between the two.

"......I guess you could say that, but rather it should be because it's this kind of critical juncture."

Saying this, he put on a light smile.

It was a smile that completely couldn't compare to Touji's and was unsuitable for his face, but Natsume burst out into a smile alongside.

For some reason, he felt his cheeks were a bit hot after seeing Natsume's smile after so long, and he hurriedly averted his gaze.

"In, In any case! Don't worry about me, my luck's bad, but I'm always able to avoid the worst outcome. Look, didn't I get dragged into a magic battle yesterday, but I returned safe and sound, right?"

He spoke lightly.

"...Oh, also, that Dairenji Suzuka doesn't seem as bad as the rumors say. She's indeed headstrong and arrogant, but she actually has her cute points. If she truly comes to the altar, I think I should be able to convince her and stay alive--"

Crash - A dull noise sounded, and Harutora hastily closed his mouth, frightened.

Looking carefully, Natsume's right hand that had originally been placed on her lap had pounded the table next to the black tea, tightly clenched into a fist.

".....I see, so she's pretty cute, huh?"

An abnormally cold voice seeped from her mouth. Harutora was extremely astonished, but with her lowered head, he couldn't see her expression from under her bangs.

Natsume suddenly took out her phone.

".....Hello, I called for a car just now. I'm leaving the store now, could I ask you to pick me up at the store entrance? .....Alright, thank you."

After she finished speaking, she hung up the phone.

"Huh? You're leaving?"

"Right, since continuing to talk would be useless."

Harutora felt that Natsume's tone was especially heavy when she mentioned the word 'useless'. His face couldn't hide his confusion at the sudden change.

"Uh..... But I still don't know the precise location of the altar....."

"I don't want to trouble you, please don't intervene."

"What, wait, wasn't I going to guard the altar?"

"Who said I would let an outsider like you guard the Tsuchimikado sanctuary? Please don't think of the proposal you brought up yourself as the answer."

Not only had the situation completely turned backwards, she was filled with some sort of unapproachable imposing force.

Natsume put away her phone and took out her purse, put her share of the money on the table, and silently stood up.

"Hey."

Harutora unconsciously stood up as well, but he was looked at by an icy gaze that could freeze with a touch.

He clearly felt a shiver. Comparing her with Suzuka that he had met yesterday night, at least Suzuka was a child. He felt that his hands and feet were stiff, and his cheeks were taut. What did I do wrong? The intimidating feeling that Natsume gave off almost made him reflect on his own life.

Natsume stared at the frozen Harutora.

"......She must be understanding because she's pretty cute? It would just make more trouble to let you guard the altar with that halfhearted attitude. You should just sit tight at home."

She forcefully suppressed her emotions, but her voice seemed like it lingered in midair. Her jet-black hair swayed as she left her seat, walking towards the cafe entrance. He knew that Natsume was definitely giving off a strong aura right now, even if he wasn't a sight-seer.

But, he couldn't let her go like this.

"Slow down! Wait, let's talk calmly, Natsume!"

Harutora dashed out as if he were leaping out of the booth, desperately shouting at the back of Natsume, who had one hand on the door handle--

Just then, something strange happened to his body.

...Huh?

Harutora hadn't noticed, this was a 'first' for him. Since he had entered the store - more accurately, since he had parted with Suzuka yesterday night - this was the first time he had called Natsume by her name.

Even if he hadn't felt it originally, he noticed magic now. After the set conditions were met, a will sleeping deep within his body rapidly awakened.

Wriggle.

He staggered, falling on the floor. The store employee screamed, and Natsume inadvertently turned around.

...W, What, what's going on.....?

The sudden abnormality caught him unprepared. He struggled to make a sound, and forced an intense cough out of his throat. He laid on the ground, holding his chest , and something thrashed around inside him.

".....Harutora-kun?"

Natsume called out to Harutora, and her tone wasn't filled with the anger just now, perhaps because she noticed Harutora's bad condition. Ahh, that's great - Even in this condition, he couldn't help but let that thought flash through his mind.

In that same moment.

Cough--!

Harutora spit something out. No, something had flown out from inside his body.

It was a piece of paper.

It was a crumpled corner torn off of a page of the scripture. The moment it rushed out of his body, the soaked page twisted like living creature, folding into a ' shape'.

The page became a bee.

Harutora's eyes widened.

--That person!

"Shikigami!?"

Natsume immediately took up a stance to guard herself.

Unfortunately, the shikigami was a step faster.

The bee-shaped shikigami danced through the air like an arrow, approaching silently and slipping into Natsume's blind spot in an instant, then piercing its stinger into her neck that was smooth as silk.

"--Uuu!"

Natsume reflexively swatted with her hand, but the bee rapidly evaded, flying out from the gap in the door that Natsume had half-opened and into the heavy downpour outside the store, where the tiny figure vanished. Everything had happened in the blink of an eye.

--Damn!

Harutora coughed as he stood himself up, and he saw Natsume stagger and collapse.

"Natsume!"

Natsume's face was pale, and her dress spread outwards as she slumped gently against the door. Her eyes were dazed and couldn't focus, and Harutora frantically ran over to her.

"Natsume! Stay strong!"

"H.....Harutora-kun....."

Natsume's body trembled slightly, and Harutora held her shoulder, cursing his scared self.

Damn, that bee!

That bee couldn't have been poisoned, right? Natsume seemed as if she noticed Harutora's thoughts, and reached out her hand, lightly touching Harutora's arm.

".....My spiritual power..... was stolen....."

"Natsume, you're alright? Your spiritual power was stolen - then what do we do?"

"Never mind that for now..... That shikigami just now was....."

Natsume asked painfully. Harutora couldn't respond, and Natsume knew the answer long before she had asked.

...They had been played.

That was Suzuka's shikigami, and Harutora had completely played into her hands.

Harutora paid their bill and carried the half-conscious Natsume to the taxi she had called for.

When one's spiritual power disappeared all at once, resistance to magic would be weakened significantly,

and though her life wasn't directly in danger, it would require a very long time to return to normal.

The main family's mansion seemed to have a tool that could recover her spiritual power, and after Harutora learned this, he decided to go to the main family residence together with Natsume.

The typhoon closed in step by step, and a stormy scene emerged outside. Large drops of rain splattered randomly on the windshield, and the car sometimes shook from the wind's fury, as if expressing Harutora's state of mind.

...It's all my fault. I hurt Natsume.....

He had originally believed that Suzuka had kissed him just to taunt Hokuto, to make her unhappy. But, it hadn't been that simple at all, and Suzuka had actually used magic at that time, setting a trap.

Thinking about it now, Suzuka had warned him in a very strange way. She had deliberately repeated three times to 'definitely tell Natsume face-to-face'. In the end, Harutora hadn't thought deeply about it, and had brought the enemy's shikigami right in front of Natsume.

Natsume was still unable to easily speak. Beads of sweat stood out on her pale forehead, and her always-sharp eyes were half-covered by her eyelids, her entire person seeming extremely weak. Her face had lost its color, and her body sank into the chair, breathing weakly.

...Damn.

His childhood friend's painful appearance made Harutora gnash his teeth. He had been blinded by his stupidity.

".....I couldn't tell..... It's my fault....." Natsume spoke, as if to console Harutora.

Natsume hadn't opened her mouth, and these words made Harutora hastily rise.

"Sorry, it's all because of me--!"

".....No, she's a Divine General..... Even if you were under her spell, it would be hard to tell....."

"But!"

"Forget about it for now..... With this, she has obtained 'me'. We have to stop her..... from reaching the altar."

Suzuka had said that she wanted Natsume to cooperate with her experiment. From her seizure of her spiritual power, it was very likely that she didn't need Natsume herself, just her spiritual power. Since she had the spiritual power, maybe Suzuka would immediately move towards the altar and hold the ceremony.

"We have to return quickly..... and prepare to fight..... "

"I, Idiot, how can you fight in this condition?"

"....."

Natsume didn't reply. It seemed that the short conversation just now had already depleted her strength, and she closed her eyes in exhaustion.

Her pale face had somehow recovered its normal unyielding look. Even though she knew it was a war she couldn't win, she still wanted to fight to the end. That strong will didn't need to be put into words, as her firm look already showed it.

...What should he do?

Just as Harutora was troubled, his phone rang.

'Harutora, are you alright over there? Did you deal with that childhood friend smoothly?'

The phone call was from Touji. He could hear the shrill sound of the wind whistling behind him, so he was probably outdoors.

Harutora glanced at Natsume. Her eyes were closed, head resting on the seat.

She looked like she was deeply asleep, and though her breathing was still laborious, it had finally stabilized. Harutora explained the situation as quietly and quickly as possible without rousing Natsume.

The shrewd Touji grasped the situation very quickly.

'I see.'

He uttered those words softly, some excitement discernable in his voice. Maybe his bad habits were showing, as he clearly showed some happiness in his demeanor.

'No wonder that brat let you go so easily. Or maybe she's just extremely careful, or you're extremely stupid...'

"Both of them. Never mind that, I have something to ask of you. Could you call the Onmyou agency or other related units and tell them about the Mystical Investigators yesterday? I don't know whether they will believe us, but I think they won't ignore you if you bring up the Tsuchimikado name."

As the news expressed, the Onmyou agency was deploying additional assistance from Tokyo, but at the moment, only the team from yesterday was here. They might not be enough to deal with Dairenji, but they would be much more useful than Natsume in her current condition and him.

But...

'Actually, I called you about the Mystical Investigators. They seem like they've found the brat, and they already started moving just now.'

"What? Really? Why do you know that?"

'Well, how should I describe it, I have a stupid friend who got caught up in this trouble after all, so I'm using a few channels to see whether I could help him out.'

His friend replied calmly from the other end of the phone.

Harutora couldn't help but smile bitterly. He said it was for Harutora, but he was definitely complaining in his heart about how he wasn't involved. However, the power of his actions was surprising, as Harutora never would have thought he would know about the actions of the Mystical Investigators. How had he done it?

"Huh, but first, did the Onmyou Agency's assistance arrive?"

'It hasn’t. It might be late because of the typhoon.'

"In that case, they'll definitely be defeated again, right?
"

'Are they that stupid? They're professionals, and they don't fight unwinnable battles. I'd guess they'd prepare an ambush after noticing that kid.'

However incredible he was, Touji didn't know what kind of actions the Mystical Investigators were taking. But, Suzuka would logically head towards the altar, and the Mystical Investigators hunting her should also move in the same direction.

After Harutora gave his opinion, Touji expressed agreement from the other side of the phone.

'Next, it's up to how the Mystical Investigators prove themselves. What about you, what are you going to do?'

"I'm taking a taxi to Natsume's - to the main family's home, it seems like there's a tool that can recover spiritual power there."

'I know, but won't that person be behind the main home looking for the altar? You might be caught up in a magic battle again.'

"Don't joke around, I can't get any more unlucky--"

Before he finished, the taxi suddenly screeched to a halt.

The driver screamed, and the sound of the brakes was ear-piercing as the car slid on the wet road.

Harutora reflexively covered Natsume's body.

Goosebumps rose all over his body, and terror grasped his heart, but fortunately there were no other cars and there was no immediate disaster. The taxi made a ninety degree spin before it finally stopped safely.

"What is it?"

"M, Monsters!"

The driver cried out to answer Harutora's question, and then, Harutora also saw that thing.

On the other side of the window that had fogged up due to the temperature, there was a group of beasts on the road that looked as if they had been made from paper .

Those were Suzuka's shikigami. Harutora couldn't help but doubt his eyes.

--Impossible!

He glanced at Natsume, who was beneath him. Natsume hadn't woken up because of the chaos, but her face was slightly twisted and she was panting fiercely as if she were having a nightmare.

"Damn.....!"

'Harutora, what happened!'

Touji yelled from the other end of the phone, noticing something was wrong. The big group of shikigami ran along the road, seemingly on a rampage...

However, they suddenly returned back to paper without any warning.

".....Huh?"

Harutora hadn't even had enough time to feel shocked before the pieces of paper were immediately brought down by the rain, as if the scene from yesterday were reenacting itself. Not long after, all of the shikigami disappeared, becoming scraps of paper scattered along the asphalt road.

".....What's going on?"

Harutora worried for a moment, deciding in the end to leave the unconscious Natsume, and walked alone out of the taxi's backseat.

The rain battered his body as soon as he walked out of the car. This place was on the outskirts of a large paddy field, and it was very far from the city. Black clouds gathered above his head, and heavy rain poured everywhere.

Right now, the sun had already set, and the surroundings were dark. There were dim streetlights on both sides of the road standing out among the darkness and rain. To his right was the paddy splashing with rain, and to his left was a rusty iron railing, with a factory construction site behind it. The shikigami had appeared from the direction of the construction site.

He could hear the sound of breaking objects and roars coming from the construction site amidst the sound of the rain.

Harutora remembered yesterday's magic battle. There were people locked in a battle of magic behind the construction site, and the people fighting were definitely Suzuka and the Mystical Investigators.

Touji's worries became reality.

"......How bad is my luck, really?"

He muttered blankly as he stood in the torrential rain.

In any case, he had to leave quickly..... Harutora thought this--

--No, wait!

Escaping would be to no avail. Today's situation was different from yesterday's, and in Harutora's current position, he had to do whatever he could to stop Suzuka's actions, especially since Natsume was bound to insist on it and definitely wouldn't listen to Harutora struggling to persuade her.

In that case.

"....."

Harutora grimaced.

"......Touji."

'Harutora? What happened?'

"I ran into her."

Touji gasped on the other end of the phone. That was obvious, as he hadn't even dreamed that Harutora would actually run into another magic battle.

'.....Damn, are you sure you haven't been cursed?'

"Maybe. But fortunately, Natsume's alright, and I'm planning on having Natsume return home in the taxi first , and I'll go observe the outcome."

'What? Hey hey, don't speak nonsense, who would go looking for trouble on their own.'

"You aren't allowed to tell me that."

At the same time as Harutora remarked, he also quickly collected his thoughts.

What Touji said was right, the Mystical Investigators couldn't have fought again with Suzuka without thinking of some countermeasures. Then there was even more of a reason for him to confirm the outcome before escaping. Of course, he wanted the Mystical Investigators to win, but if they lost, he would have to know as soon as possible to be able to ready the following plans.

Even if he was actually already helpless.

'Don't go, Harutora. The enemy's an Onmyouji, what can you do?'

"I can't do anything, all I can do is go see who wins. Also, even if Dairenji Suzuka wins, maybe there will be an opportunity if she's exhausted her strength or drops her guard."

'What opportunity?'

".....An opportunity to sneak up to her and beat her up ."

'Alright, Harutora, I get that you're an idiot, now listen to me and get out of there.'

"Shut up, I was just joking."

Touji wanted wholeheartedly to stop Harutora, but Harutora just briefly told him his destination and hung up the phone.

He returned to the taxi, asking the driver to send Natsume back home. This driver seemed to be a

dedicated taxi driver of the main family, and had many dealings with the main family. Even if his face was pale, he still answered Harutora's request.

"......Natsume."

Natsume's consciousness still hadn't recovered, and Harutora quietly called her name.

Seeing Natsume's current appearance, he actually didn't want to leave her, but considering that he wouldn't be of any use by Natsume's side either, it would probably be more useful to her for him to confirm who won.

He took out a healing charm from his charm box.

The healing charm was one that treated injuries using spiritual power, and it couldn't restore spiritual power, and Natsume's current spiritual power was weak, so the charm's magic wouldn't have much effect.

"......I wish I could use this thing....."

It was too late to say that now. But, even if Natsume's spiritual power was weak, his own spiritual power might help a bit. Harutora chanted in a mutter, holding the charm tightly.

Natsume still slept deeply. Harutora said 'I'm counting on you' to the driver after sticking the charm to Natsume's chest, and watched the taxi leave.

Part 4

Harutora crossed the iron railing that the shikigami had crushed, entering the construction site.

Buildings were lined up before his eyes, and it became noisier and noisier. He clumsily splashed through puddles, his entire body soaking, as he ran.

He ran towards the back of the construction site.

There was a parking lot in the back of the construction site, and there was a big truck stopped there as well as two armored vehicles with their lights on.

In addition, there were big and small human figures fighting in the rain.

Those people were Suzuka and the Mystical Investigators who had showed up yesterday.

There was a big difference between the current state and the battle yesterday, and Suzuka had been tightly surrounded, with only two shikigami present - giant, three-meter tall shikigami being manipulated by the Mystical Investigators. Suzuka's shikigami that had displayed overwhelming might yesterday was not present.

No, looking carefully, there were scattered scraps of paper covered with mud on the unpaved surface of the parking lot. The scene by the taxi just now should have been mirrored here, and the wreckage of the scripture could even be seen by Suzuka's feet as it was battered by the rain.

...But, why?

Harutora was a bit confused, but he soon found the answer to that question.

There were ten Mystical Investigators surrounding Suzuka, and among them there were only two fighting Suzuka directly, with the other eight continuously chanting incantations as they encircled Suzuka.

An intense light was rising from the ground around the Mystical Investigator chanting incantations. The sound of the incantation and the sound of the wind and rain formed a unique melody, following the oscillations of the light.

".....Is that a barrier? Are they using that to seal the shikigami?"

Of course, Harutora didn't know it was named the ' Eight-Point Barrier', a powerful technique of exorcists that was prohibited in combat. It was mostly used to seal spiritual disasters third phase or higher, and normally wouldn't be used against humans. This time, the Onmyou Agency had specially permitted those in charge to take the same measures as for a spiritual disaster in order to deal with the rebellion of a National First-Class Onmyouji.

The use of that prohibited move proved that the Mystical Investigators' ambush was successful. Suzuka

had used Harutora and obtained Natsume's spiritual power, and the Mystical Investigators had taken advantage of her putting all her effort into seizing that spiritual power.

"......Stop right there. Even if you're the 'Child Prodigy', you can't destroy the Eight-Point Barrier from the inside. Listen to me and surrender."

One of the Mystical Investigators persuaded Suzuka with a strict tone.

Afterwards, the two giant shikigami standing on both sides of the Mystical Investigator moved forward. They were the heavy-duty law enforcement shikigami 'G1 Emperor', and they seemed colossal compared to Suzuka's small body.

...Had they won?

Harutora hid behind a building, holding his breath as he watched the situation unfold.

"......Don't think you've won....."

Suzuka murmured inside the barrier.

Her tone was breathless, and her thin shoulders were heaving up and down, she was soaked, and her originally tied-up golden hair drooped down heavily. Her appearance as she stood in the rain was like a child who had been abandoned by her parents.

But, her round eyes were still shining with light, and her small body gave off a dangerous air.

"To think you treat humans like spiritual disasters..... But unfortunately, you should have taken the opportunity to shoot me quickly or taken some other actions. I see that you guys don't have enough real battle experience."

The rain dripped down the girl's face.

She didn't wipe off the rain, but showed an appalling sneer.

"Do you know what my research specialty is? I'll let you experience the original creation, not by me, but by Tsuchimikado Yakou - The military-use shikigami that he created!"

Saying this, Suzuka turned around, casting her gaze on the truck stopped in the parking lot.

She shouted at the container on the truck:

"Spell release! Come, Tsuchigumo[12]!"

Crash - A heavy sound rang out, and the container was destroyed from the inside.

Crash, crash, the container was destroyed, torn open, split into fragments, and fell to the ground.

Immediately after, a strangely-shaped form appeared in the rain.

It was a spider.

It was a giant spider made of steel. It had eight long legs, and its body was far larger than the container. Samurai armor was affixed to the top half of its body, around its head, abdomen, and the muzzles of the cannons that poked out from both sides.

It wore an ancient conical samurai helmet with a flashing golden pentagram on the front, and a dim flame shone in the rain from the half-covered eye holes.

".....A, An 'Armored Juggernaut[13]'!?"

The Mystical Investigators voiced their surprise one after another, and the chanted incantation paused because of this, the light of the barrier vanishing accordingly.

Suzuka laughed loudly.

"Go."

The steel spider moved.

Its outer appearance was like a heavy machine, but its movements were about the same as a normal shikigami, as if it were just a living spider. It moved on its eight legs , closing in on the Mystical Investigators step by step.

"......Ugh!"

One Mystical Investigator among them opened fire on Tsuchigumo. The bullets sparked and were easily repelled. Guns were useful against man-made shikigami, but they were worthless against a steel shikigami.

"Damn!"

The Mystical Investigator who had just been speaking to Suzuka sent out the two Emperors, trying to suppress Tsuchigumo's movements.

However, the movements of the modern Emperor shikigami were inferior to the Armored Juggernaut built for war. Tsuchigumo leaped up, kicking aside an Emperor and piercing through the body of the other.

The Emperor that had been pierced through grew blurry as if its body were being tampered with, showing ' lag' effects. The Armored Juggernaut slashed out again with a huge blade.

The blade flashed in the dim lighting.

As Armored Juggernaut swung the knife, cleaving the giant shikigami in two, the shikigami's charm tore in half , falling onto the rain-battered ground. Tsuchigumo speared the other Emperor with a fluid movement.

The Mystical Investigators were in disarray.

Gunfire rang out, and countless charms flew through the air, but none of these attacks were effective.

"What kind of monster is that....."

Harutora muttered, dumbstruck.

Regardless of whether it was fire or shikigami generated from charms, magic would become ' ambiguous' upon coming in contact with material, and though the laws of physics were unable to affect them fully, receiving a strong external impact would wound its materiality and lead to a 'lag' phenomenon.

Since the Armored Juggernaut had a steel body, it was directly imbued with 'hardness', and the spells engraved on the inside of the armor upped its strong defensive power against magical attacks.

It had been crafted 'flesh' through oil and metal, and had compensated for its 'ambiguity'. It was a shikigami that had true destructive force and defensive power.

The Armored Juggernaut was a military shikigami.

...H, How could they defeat this kind of thing?

The parking lot of the construction site turned into a burning battlefield of magic.

Flames spread and engulfed the darkness, torrents of water swept up the rain, fragments of metal danced through the air, and sharp spikes of earth flew from the cracked ground.

Tsuchigumo's movements were nimble, like an armored vehicle fighting infantry. There seemed to be no ammunition in its cannons, but even without firepower, there was an overwhelming difference between the fighting power of the two sides.

Spider silk shot from the mouthpiece of the wrathful-looking samurai armor on Tsuchigumo.

One Mystical Investigator after another was captured by the spider silk, quickly becoming weak and unable to resist. It was a similar scene to Natsume when she had been stung by the bee-shaped shikigami, and he knew at a glance that their spiritual power had been absorbed.

Tsuchigumo drove off the resistance of its enemies one by one, continuously spitting silk to constrict the Mystical Investigators.

Then, its feet stomped down forcefully, and the final Mystical Investigator collapsed.

The noise of the rain became more apparent in the inadvertent silence that fell. Harutora clenched his teeth, but he could do nothing at all other than hide in the darkness.

...What the hell.

This was truly the worst possible situation. Since the manpower assistance from Tokyo hadn't come on time, they had basically announced that they could no longer stop Suzuka, and of course it wasn't at all possible for there to be an opportunity to sneakily beat her up.

...What should I do?

Harutora couldn't think of a single clue as he stood blankly in the rain.

Just then, a phone rang again. It was Harutora's phone that rang, not someone else's.

The lively sound of the ringtone echoed through the post-battle parking lot, and he actually felt his own heart leap.

"Who's there!?"

Suzuka asked fiercely, and the originally motionless Tsuchigumo began warming up simultaneously. Was it the fault of his luck for being that bad, or was it his own fault for not thinking to silence his phone? Harutora couldn't help but stare into the sky.

Regardless, he was now stuck between a rock and a hard place, and he showed himself in the parking lot, depressed.

Suzuka's fierce look disappeared momentarily upon seeing an unexpected person emerge.

"You're from yesterday....."

"....Hi."

Harutora grudgingly called out.

He had declared in the cafe that he would step up and fight, and he hadn't thought he had been forfeiting his life, but after he saw how Suzuka used the bee-shaped shikigami and how she easily fought off the Mystical Investigators, his confidence from that time had already vacillated immensely.

However, Suzuka didn't give him the same fate as the Mystical Investigators.

He didn't believe that communicating with Suzuka could reverse the situation, but it was better than sitting still and waiting for his death. More importantly, he hadn't thought of any other way, and a compromise by both parties was the best way to keep Natsume from getting dragged into the situation.

Suzuka didn't stop sizing up Harutora, her gaze filled with suspicion.

Harutora checked his constantly ringing phone. He couldn't help but show a dry smile upon seeing the caller ID on the phone.

It was from Hokuto.

...Really, she was so nosy.

Judging by the time, it was probably Touji's fault. He had definitely told Hokuto about Harutora's current situation, and Hokuto had called him out of worry. Even though the two of them had fought and parted yesterday evening.

"......Who's calling you? Is it alright not to answer?"

Suzuka asked coldly. Harutora made a 'nn' sound, hanging up without answering the phone.

If Hokuto had learned of his location from Touji... If she noticed she had been hung up on, it was possible that she would immediately rush over here even in the current typhoon. Touji should also be here soon. He had to take action as soon as possible, before they got here.

...Though on the other hand, what action would that be.

He mocked himself while breathing deeply at the same time, letting his mood calm down.

He stared into Suzuka's eyes, thinking about what step to take.

First.....

"......Nice of you, making your shikigami stay a whole evening in my stomach. Just thinking about it makes me shiver."

"......Hmph, let me tell you, that was my first kiss, so it's a small price to pay. Right, darling?"

Suzuka remained vigilant, but her attitude facing Harutora was much more relaxed than with the Mystical Investigators. The tone she replied with was as overbearing as yesterday's, but it was kind of intimate.

"But don't get me wrong, you're no longer useful. I don't know how you found this place, but if you want to follow me around like a pervert, I won't forgive you."

No longer useful - Suzuka's goal really was to seize Natsume's spiritual power, and in other words, everything was already prepared now. Harutora cursed in his heart.

"Let me tell you, you weren't the person I was originally looking for. If there was a photograph in the research lab database, I wouldn't have made that outrageous mistake."

"......Research lab? It seems like you usually shut yourself inside there, right? Judging by your appearance at the festival yesterday, you're not very worldly."

"What? You're too arrogant, do you not understand your position?"

"Did I hit the mark?"

"Ugh..... You, you're really maddening!"

Suzuka narrowed her eyes, looking like he really had hit the mark. But she seemed as if she instantly remembered something, asking: "Right! What happened with you and that ugly girl yesterday? Did you fight?"

".....It wasn't all you."

"Haha! You deserved it, who asked you to perform that crappy drama. What a joke."

Harutora narrowed his eyes, and Suzuka clapped her hands and cheered while looking on, looking like she was having fun, it now being Harutora's turn to be angry .

".....You're really such an uncute brat."

"Huh, are you blind? You can't find many girls in this world as cute as I am."

"Never mind your appearance, your personality is terrible."

"Haha, what 'never mind appearance'. You're angry because you realize it, huh? So simple."

"Shut up, let me tell you, there definitely won't be anyone liking you in the future!"

"How's that possible, I'm a beautiful prodigy Onmyouji, there will definitely be a big group of people scrambling for my favor!"

"Don't speak nonsense, you near-criminal!"

He inadvertently roared, and maybe because he had hit the mark, Suzuka suddenly closed her mouth. Damn, Harutora also returned to his senses at the same time.

He had carelessly spoken the words in his heart, and if this went on, 'properly discussing' was a pipe dream. If Touji were here, he would definitely be shaking his head with a face full of pity.

But, that unreasonable conversation seemed to have eliminated the knife-edge atmosphere from the area. Harutora mustered his courage, slowly approaching Suzuka.

".....Hey, why don't you stop this, alright?"

"What? What are you spewing? Are you really an idiot ?"

"I realize that I'm stupid, but you're also being dumb."

Harutora replied candidly, wording it directly. Anger plainly showed on Suzuka's expression, but she didn't interrupt Harutora's words, so it was a decent reaction.

"You said you wanted to revive your brother, right?"

He spoke to confirm, and Suzuka showed a stiff expression.

Harutora didn't back off, continuing to speak:

"I don't have brothers or sisters, but I can understand your feelings. After all, it's a normal feeling for people to want to revive their dead family, but you shouldn't do it.

Even if your brother is revived, you and even your brother will become criminals."

"......You're really annoying, what are you trying to say ?"

"Idiot, my meaning is, your brother won't be happy even if you revive him like this."

"Don't talk like you understand my brother, I'm the one who knows my brother the best!"

Suzuka howled, her eyes staring straight at Harutora.

Tsuchigumo behind her stomped the ground with its eight legs, responding to its master's emotional agitation. Tsuchigumo was shockingly imposing from up close. Harutora held his breath, but he couldn’t give up here.

"Did you tell your parents? Did they not oppose you doing this?"

"Hmph! I don't have parents, I definitely don't recognize them. Those two people only used my brother and I like garbage."

"Hey, don't talk about your own parents like--"

"They aren't even people! How do you think I became a Divine General at this age? Since I was born - no, since before I was born, they tortured me! They cast forbidden spells on my body, and they killed my brother like that!"

Suzuka's face twisted as she yelled loudly. Harutora momentarily didn't know how to reply upon hearing the girl's devastating accusations.

In other words, Suzuka had been made into an experimental product by her parents - who had probably both been magic-users. They had cast various magics on her body in order to make her become an excellent magician, uncaring of her wishes.

Since she had been born, she had been forced to bear a tremendous darkness. It was different from himself who grumbled about family traditions.

Harutora felt anguished, but there were things he felt he had to say.

".....I shouldn't have spoken rashly without knowing anything. Sorry, I'm sorry for that....."

"Stop joking around! I don't need your sympathy!"

"......I thought so too. But listen, since you hate your parents so much, that's even more of a reason not to do the same thing as them."

Harutora strode forward again upon saying this. He was scared, but the feeling that he couldn't leave her alone was growing more and more intense.

"Isn't soul magic banned? If you cast that magic, won't you be the same as your parents?"

"Shut up, what do you know!"

"I know one thing at least - You're planning on holding the final ceremony of Yakou's life, right? Do you know how many people will be sacrificed if the same thing happens again? Doing that is the same as trampling on countless human lives!"

"No one will be sacrificed! I'm a specialist dedicated to Yakou research, and I completely investigated the Taizan Fukun Ritual long ago. If I pay the right price, it won't lead to spiritual disasters!" Suzuka insisted.

She shouted loudly, like a hurt cat trying to intimidate someone approaching it. But, even if this cat had been hurt, it could still claw people to death. Harutora suppressed the fear in his heart and approached Suzuka.

But--

"You haven't actually checked, right?"

"That's why I need to experiment!"

"That's too messy. Also, what's the correct price?"

"It's my life!"

Harutora abruptly stopped moving.

Suzuka finally showed a satisfied smile upon seeing Harutora's surprised expression.

"......Right, I'm going to give my own life to my brother ..... How is it? Are you still concerned?"

Harutora felt it hard to believe, and he gazed at Suzuka - gazed at this girl who was even younger than he was, and then he understood. She wasn't lying, she truly planned on sacrificing her own life.

An almost crazed light flashed in Suzuka's wide eyes as she reveled in the sublime act of self-sacrifice. Maybe this reaction proved that her mind wasn't fully matured, but she was truly trying to sacrifice herself.

A National First-Class Onmyouji was destroying the regulations, encroaching upon forbidden magic, and even planned on sacrificing her own life.

A youthful craze drove her to do this - and her family. In particular, the latter had made her unable to turn back.

But.

"......Then that's even more of a reason to stop."

Harutora insisted.

Suzuka's haughty look froze for a moment upon hearing Harutora say this. She had originally believed Harutora had already been convinced, and for a while,

couldn't understand the meaning behind Harutora's words.

Once she understood what Harutora's words meant, her anger instantly flared up, and she opened her mouth, preparing to lambast the stupid man in front of her with venomous words.

But Harutora made the first move, speaking with a calm tone:

"You plan on leaving first and making your brother bear the crime you committed? Sacrificing yourself? That would be rather pitiful for your brother who will be left alone in this world."

"That....."

For once, a timid look showed in Suzuka's eyes.

".....That's nonsense, it's impossible, my brother would definitely....."

"Do you think he'd be happy to see you do this? Sacrificing his sister for his own life - do you think he'd be grateful for you? Don't even talk about after revival, he'd be treated as an experimental product of forbidden

magic. If it does lead to a spiritual disaster, all of society will raise its voice to condemn your brother - not just the Onmyou Agency. Do you have the heart to make your brother live on pitifully, bearing your mistake by himself ? Are you still going to say that you're doing this for your brother?"

Harutora spoke every word slowly and clearly.

Suzuka's pink lips trembled. She wanted to stare at Harutora, but she didn't want their gazes to cross, so she could only grind her teeth.

"......What, how can you lecture me....."

In her heart, Suzuka desperately denied Harutora's words, no longer noticing the Mystical Investigators or the tension of the situation, and instead feeling the wavering of her heart and her own flaws.

The rain spilled forth, swaying with the wind, roughly battering the bodies of the two people standing in the rain.

Harutora looked at the shaken girl.

"......Your life will still be pretty long, so you don't need to rush a decision. Think about it a little more."

Suzuka hesitated, timidly looking at Harutora. Her body already seemed frozen, as her face was pale and her lips were clenched.

It was no longer one of the Twelve Divine Generals who stood before him, and this was the first time Harutora felt a sense of closeness towards Suzuka.

In the end, Suzuka was similar to Harutora, just brats who had been cornered by reality. Harutora realized how different the two were, as Suzuka had chosen destruction. Harutora hadn't had the ability to resist, but Suzuka did and had.

Harutora slowly closed the distance to Suzuka in the rain. Suzuka's entire body trembled - but she didn't try to escape.

The distance between the two shortened, and all that was left was as much distance as when they had first confronted each other.

Unfortunately, this was already the closest they would get to each other.

"......B, Bind her! Order!"

Suzuka was attacked.

A fallen Mystical Investigator flung out a charm, trying to perform his responsibility with his final bit of spiritual power as he barely maintained his consciousness.

The wood-element charm became a tendril in midair, wrapping around Suzuka who stood in the rain. The magically-formed tendril bound Suzuka in a moment, and her small body toppled accordingly.

The Mystical Investigator laboriously stood up in front of the scared-silly Harutora. He was the same as Natsume, with a hazy consciousness due to his loss of spiritual power.

On the other hand, Suzuka who had been attacked was covered to mud in head to toe, and furious.

"Damn it - Don't mess with me!"

She roared angrily, her eyes bloodshot. The shikigami directly reacted to its master's anger, raising the steel limb that it had just pierced through the Emperors with and emotionlessly swinging it down at the buckling Mystical Investigator below.

Mud and water splattered underneath Harutora's sneakers.

His body advanced, running forward while stumbling. Tsuchigumo's movements seemed extremely slow in that instant, and the steel leg slowly closed in on the Mystical Investigator's head.

Harutora kicked off the ground, using the force of his entire body to knock away the Mystical Investigator. The Mystical Investigator was sent flying out, collapsed on the ground, and lost consciousness again.

But, everything was over. Harutora fell to the ground after knocking away the man.

Mud sprayed onto his face and water splashed everywhere. A scream sounded from the side, probably Suzuka's. Harutora didn't have the leisure to listen to that scream, as he rose to his knees with difficulty. He

had just thought of standing up, when the feeling of something approaching came from above him.

He was going to die, Harutora calmly thought.

Twelve accidents hadn't taken away his life, but he had never expected to die from being crushed by a spider . That was way too miserable. An emptiness washed over his mind and he cursed his misfortune.

Slowly, he noticed that there was no impact.

His body could still move. He hurriedly adjusted his body, turning around halfway and raising his head.

This time, a complete emptiness entered his mind.

"......Hokuto?"

Hokuto stood in front of him, using her own body to block Tsuchigumo's leg.

The incomprehensible scene in front of him interrupted his thinking, making him feel detached from reality. He stared blankly and mechanically at the scene.

Hokuto was between the fallen Harutora and Tsuchigumo that had slashed out with its leg. The tip of Tsuchigumo's leg pierced deeply through Hokuto's left shoulder, straight through her heart. But Hokuto didn't collapse from this, and she had grabbed the steel limb with both hands, stopping Tsuchigumo's attack. Her eyes were wide and bright, and her cute face had become pale , teeth clenched.

What kind of joke was this.

".....Hokuto? You....."

".....Run away....."

"What are you saying, you're....."

"Run away!"

Hokuto yelled.

Then, her fingers slid along the exterior of the steel limb piercing through herself.

"Ban, Un, Taraku, Kiriku, Aku[14]! By the five elements , destroy the inner wall!"

Every time she chanted one of those names, she drew a line.

A pentagram[15].

It was a magical pattern representing the five elements of yin and yang, known in Onmyoudou as the 'star mark' , 'Seimei's Bellflower Mark', or 'Seimei's Mark'. After being used by Abe no Seimei, it later became the Tsuchimikado family crest.

Light emerged from the mark as she chanted while drawing it. Tsuchigumo - just like a true spider fearing fire - suddenly jumped backwards, throwing Hokuto off.

The leg piercing through Hokuto's shoulder mercilessly carved through her chest, and her body drew out an arc and flew out like a ball after being tossed out in midair.

A shrill scream entered Harutora's ears.

He stood up, not noticing that it had been his own scream.

He completely pushed the matters of Tsuchigumo and Suzuka to the back of his mind, turning his back to the enemy and sprinting towards Hokuto who had been thrown off to the side.

His body moved, his blood began pumping, and his rationality gradually began accepting the situation that his emotions refused to understand.

Hokuto had rushed over because of that phone call just now. Right, hadn't he predicted all of this? In the end , it was right in front of him. Impossible. Something had to be wrong. His rationality tried to seal off the emotions bursting through his throat.

What spilled forth next was terror.

A boundless fear began to assault Harutora.

"Hokuto!"

Hokuto's limbs drooped powerlessly to the ground like a broken doll.

The rain battered her slightly trembling body, and Harutora's vision darkened as he looked at the scene of

his heavily injured friend. He angrily roared, shouted, and picked Hokuto up in despair.

In that instant.

Hokuto's body suddenly wavered as if its image were being interfered with.

Her profile distorted, and her body became transparent.

'Lag'.

The scene in his hands caused Harutora to stop thinking again, and he even forgot to breathe, his entire body stiffening up.

Just then, he finally noticed something.

Tsuchigumo had carved a huge, deep wound from Hokuto's left shoulder to her chest, an appalling wound.

But she didn't shed a single drop of blood. Only the constant rain wet her body.

"......Hoku... to......?"

Harutora called out softly, with a pathetic, weak tone.

Hokuto looked at him from his arms, her mouth forming a lonely smile.

"......Bakatora..... Why didn't you..... pick up....."

"....."

Her figure didn't stop flickering as she spoke, and her profile became blurrier and blurrier, with some interfering noise like static mixed in with her mumbled voice. The feeling of her lying in his arms also gradually faded.

"Hokuto, you..... you....."

Hokuto showed a wry smile.

She put on a sad expression, saying:

"......I lied to you..... I'm sorry for always deceiving you ."

"Idiot, what does that mean? What are you saying, why did you become like this, what's going on?"

Harutora panicked, but Hokuto just looked at her confused, panicked friend with a slight smile.

She reached out with her shaking arm, grabbing Harutora's chest with force.

"Harutora, I..... I love you, so..... Run away..... I won't forgive you if you die....."

Hokuto smiled as she spoke.

Then, as if her image burst apart - Hokuto disappeared .

An old shikigami charm with traces of repairs all over it floated into Harutora's hands.

"....Hokuto?"

A voice squeezed out from inside him unconsciously drifted out of his mouth, and his body's energy dwindled in the rain.

"....Are you an idiot?" Suzuka said.

The magical energy in the charm had lost its effectiveness, and she had long since rid herself of the binding tendrils.

She stared at Harutora through the rain.

"What, that person was a shikigami all along? You made your own shikigami your girlfriend? Haha, how stupid. To think you would do such disgusting things in private while speaking so righteously!"

Suzuka's voice trembled, and a faint guilt could be sensed from her trembling voice as if she were afraid of being berated. It was as if she were faking strength, trying to gloss over things.

Harutora slowly turned around.

"Who are you talking about?"

"That girl, of course. I didn't immediately see she was a shikigami, so she was made pretty well, huh. Did you make it? But in that case, you should at least make one a bit more useful, no, no matter, I'll make one for you, I'll make one stronger than that--"

"....."

Harutora slowly rose, deciding not to listen anymore. He spoke with a tone he had never heard from himself before:

"...Shut up."

"......Huh?"

"Don't say another word."

The atmosphere in the air was changing.

Harutora's vision stabbed through Suzuka.

His eyes gave off the light of a tiger's ferocious anger, with fangs and claws that could easily tear a girl apart.

Suzuka's expression contorted like she had been slapped in the face.

"What? Wh, who do you think you are? Do you know who you're talking to?"

Suzuka replied angrily, but her voice was trembling more than before. Her indignant, sharp tone hid a glass-like fragility.

She stared back at Harutora, a sliver of killing intent mixed in her gaze.

However, she was the first to avert her eyes. She swung her wet hair as if to escape from Harutora's gaze, turning around.

She clicked her tongue, running towards the truck. Tsuchigumo followed its master and jumped onto the truck bed where the debris of the container remained, folding its eight legs back up into the container.

Suzuka summoned the black suit-wearing simple shikigami, ordering it to drive, as she opened the door to the passenger seat.

Finally, she turned around and spat out the words:

"......I'll definitely kill you next time."

Saying that, she got in the truck and closed the door.

The truck quickly started its engine as soon as she got on, leaving the parking lot. Harutora watched the truck vanish on the road, alone in the rain.

Thunder suddenly flashed from afar, and the low rumble of thunder sounded amidst the sounds of the wind and downpour.

The sun had already set.

The storm showed no signs of stopping.

Chapter 4 - Progeny of the Tsuchimikado

Part 1

Harutora and Hokuto had met over their first summer vacation after entering middle school.

It was in a small park near the tram stop, under a blue, sunny cloudless sky, and the fresh green leaves shone like emeralds in the sunlight.

The first time he met Hokuto he had been unable to keep his eyes off her. She looked like an idol that he liked at the time, and had been about as old as him. Harutora watched from the distance for a long time, wondering what school the girl went to.

The girl was sitting alone on a park bench, and once she noticed Harutora's gaze, her body suddenly jumped up like a spring. Her eyes widened in Harutora's direction and her mouth gaped to make quite a strange reaction. After all, he didn't know this girl.

Harutora felt it was very strange, and tried approaching the girl. Noticing, the girl quickly escaped from the park, vanishing instantly and without a trace,

leaving behind the stunned Harutora blankly standing still - that was the first meeting between Harutora and Hokuto.

Harutora ended up meeting Hokuto again - Actually, ' spotting' would be more appropriate - the second day after the first meeting in the park.

From then on Harutora would always feel like there was a person spying on him. He didn't have that feeling when he was at home, but once he walked out onto the road, he would feel like there was someone gazing at him from behind. But every time he turned around no one was there.

He turned around frequently, wondering whether he was being followed. But he didn't expect that he was actually being followed. He noticed the other person purely by chance. At the time, he had been walking by a car parked to the side, and he saw the figure of his follower from the side view mirror.

It was that girl he had run into in the park.

He reflexively turned around, meeting eyes with Hokuto, who was caught by surprise. Hokuto escaped on foot, and he chased after her. Unfortunately, Hokuto's

speed was shocking, and her figure vanished in moments ..... Back then, a similar thing would happen every three days, and not long after it became every two days, and in the end, this drama would be performed every day. It was the strangest human relationship Harutora had in his life.

Harutora chased, Hokuto ran, and these days continued for a period of time.

Why does she follow me around? Why does she run? Harutora pondered but couldn't understand and only felt baffled.

But instead, that baffling feeling inflamed Harutora's fighting spirit.

He thought of several plots, but Hokuto saw through them. Before he noticed, he had already been deeply engrossed in this game of tag. He had never passed a summer vacation where he had racked his brain, run around, and sweated this much.

Meaningless, hot, exciting, and mystery-filled days.

He absorbed himself in the chase in that nostalgic summer sunlight.

But in the end, Harutora didn't catch Hokuto a single time.

On the last day of summer vacation, he decided to change his methods. Early in the day, he came to the park they had first met, and waited there for the whole day. He didn't do anything, just stayed in the park and waited idiotically, and in doing so even made himself wonder whether he had gone crazy. He endured the torment of the heat, sweating until he was almost dehydrated, but the thought of going somewhere to cool down never crossed his mind.

Hokuto appeared at dusk.

The instant the sun fell under the horizon, in the short moment when the light hadn't completely vanished, when the sky was dyed a magical indigo--

Hokuto's determined appearance walked straight up to Harutora, and she opened her mouth like she was going to come clean.

But Harutora spoke first before she made a sound:

"You don’t need to say anything, it's your win."

She closed her mouth, her eyes sizing Harutora up, like she was speculating the meaning of those words.

"I didn't catch you even at the end, so I think you probably don't want people to know your background, right?"

Hokuto stood silently with an awkward face, but Harutora was beaming with a smile.

"You're really crazy fast for a girl. But let me at least tell you my name. I'm Harutora."

He stood up from the bench upon saying this, extending his hand.

Hokuto looked intently at Harutora's hand like a small animal seeing food, and then her eyes - her slightly lowered, big eyes - gradually shone with light.

She quietly reached out her hand, timidly touching Harutora's hand, and then she shook his hand firmly like she wouldn't let go.

Afterwards, a blooming, naive smile emerged on her face - one that Harutora would often see in the future.

Harutora barely understood Hokuto at all. A mysterious girl - Touji had called Hokuto this, but Harutora didn't care, since in the end he liked Hokuto being by his side.

That summer day ended, welcoming in the fall, fall gave way to winter, and a year passed. The second year passed, and the two of them stayed as they were. Touji joined during the third year, and Harutora's surroundings became even livelier.

The secretive girl and the juvenile delinquent - Everyone seemed to get along very well, and Harutora felt satisfied.

So he didn't want to destroy the relationships between them three.

So he wanted to always go on like this.

That would be pretty nice, he thought.

Part 2

Harutora ran on the straight road at night.

The heavy rain didn't stop, and thunder even began rumbling, flashes of lightning slashing through the night.

Unmindful of the horrible weather, Harutora had ran alone from the construction site that had been made into a magical battlefield.

He ran to chase Suzuka.

At the same time, he ran to stop Suzuka.

His mind was blank and he didn't think of anything, just rushing forward. His breathing was erratic, and his heart felt like it was torn, intense pain wracking his entire body.

He had dulled the pain with a healing charm for treating wounds and fatigue, and every time it failed, he changed to a new charm, never stopping his run.

It was dark all around, the streetlights on either side glowing weakly. He almost couldn't see the road under his feet in this torrential downpour. The road extended into the darkness, and he could only vaguely see the road in front of him. He had long since forgotten how long had passed, nor did he know how far he had ran, and all

he heard was the resounding sound of thunder and the sound of his breathless gasps. He constantly ran, running through the rain, running through the night, running through flashes of lightning, moving forward on an unknown road.

He didn't stop running.

His hand clutched the charm Hokuto had left behind after she disappeared.

He made an effort to not think of Hokuto, and maybe it could be said that he was running to keep his mind off it, to make those thoughts go away.

His thoughts inadvertently faded alongside his chaotic breathing, but when he stumbled, tumbling onto the road, his memories burst forth one by one like geysers, making him unable to help but recall the old days.

Hokuto's appearance had never changed since the first time they met. Her body was thin, but had an unbelievably durable body and arm strength to match. She was fast on her feet, and she could even catch Touji sprinting as hard as he could. She didn't like talking about herself - They had never heard her mention her family or friends.

Just now, when she had been wounded but hadn't leaked a drop of blood, she had even blocked the spider's steel leg while simultaneously casting magic. She had disappeared like smoke when she was lying in Harutora's arms, leaving behind her words telling Harutora to run away. She hadn't become a corpse, but a shikigami charm instead.

To think that there could be such a thing.

...Damn.

Harutora was out of breath, yelling 'that idiot' in his heart.

...Why was she a shikigami?

The thought 'A fake Hokuto appeared just now, and the real Hokuto is somewhere else' emerged once, but he couldn't fool himself like that. 'I lied to you, I'm sorry for always deceiving you.' Hokuto had said that.

Could it be that everything had been fake? Her existence had been fake, and her memories had also been fake?

All the time he had been with her, every word she said , everything had been a lie - Could he had been lied to?

If I've been lied to...

If Hokuto's existence had been a lie from the beginning , if she had never once existed...

Might she not be dead?

...'Harutora, I love you.'

Lightning struck, and thunder roared.

He wanted to yell as loud as he could, but breathless as he was, he couldn't even shout the words in his heart. So, he strode forward, immersing himself in running forward, sprinting forth - Running desperately, thinking of running until the ends of the earth.

Rain. Night. Lightning. Thunder.

His vision became blurry, his consciousness faded, and he couldn't even feel the movements of his legs, as if his body had long since expended its energy and was depending on the assistance of his soul to continue running.

Depending on his soul.....

A flash of lightning split the atmosphere, followed by a clap of thunder, and the air shook intensely.

Right, where had Hokuto's soul gone? She also had a soul, right? If she did - If the shikigami also has a soul, he wanted to see her again even if she was fake. Everything will be fine if I see her, I want to ask her clearly and understand. If her soul is wandering around somewhere right now--

Then.

Harutora stopped.

He didn't know how long he had run for. When he came to his sense, he hadn't seen the streetlights by the sides of the road for a long time, as only the rain continued falling in the world that seemed as if all light had disappeared.

At the end of the darkness, on the other side, there was a fuzzy, weak point of light that glowed faintly.

It seemed like a soul.

".....Hokuto?"

A hoarse voice came from his mouth.

But, it wasn't a soul.

It was the light from a lantern. Harutora knew that he had reached his destination.

There was a minor road straight ahead, which led up to a gently sloped ramp accessing the hill behind him. There were stone steps heading up the slope next to the road, and there was the roof of an ancient-looking wooden shrine next to the stone steps, with a lantern hanging from the roof and giving off a misty light.

Thunder flashed, illuminating the lantern under the roof.

The pentagram family crest was printed on the lantern --

Along with the word 'Tsuchimikado'.

Harutora stood in the night, catching his breath and looking at the light. Then, he walked closer as if to drive away the darkness.

He stood next to the lantern, looking at the stone steps. The precipitous steps gave off the impression of a skyline in the darkness, blending into the dense, dark trees on either side. Two points of light shone like a mirage at the very top, the light of lanterns.

Harutora climbed the stone steps.

The force of the rain weakened, the sound of the shaking tree leaves growing noisier instead.

He stepped up the stone stairs one after another, climbing up step by step. He grew closer to the night sky with every step upwards.

Foreboding dark clouds and blinding lightning.

He reached the hilltop.

There was an outer door at the end of the stone steps, with starred lanterns similar to the one below on either side of it.

He opened the door wide from the outside.

On the other side of the door was the Tsuchimikado main family mansion, as if hidden from the dark night.

"....."

He hadn't come here in a long time. There were no electric lights inside, and it didn't seem like there was anyone home, but there was a living presence as if the mansion itself was quietly breathing.

Had Natsume arrived home safely? Just as a slight anxiety rose in Harutora's heart.....

"...Close the door, I'm in the Bellflower Room..."

For a moment, he thought he had heard wrong. But, he hadn't been mistaken. A butterfly flew onto the nose of Harutora who was staring around the mansion, and a pure voice led Harutora through the creepy atmosphere.

The butterfly before him was a shikigami, and it had been Natsume's voice just now. She really had made it home.

Harutora held tightly to the shikigami charm in his hand, following the dancing butterfly into the mansion.

Part 3

He walked into the entrance, moving through the corridor.

He was a bit concerned about entering the mansion dripping wet, but the surroundings were dark, and it would be hard for him to turn on a light, much less find a towel to dry himself. Only the butterfly leading Harutora glowed with light in the darkness. He followed the butterfly, relying on his memory as he walked into the mansion.

After walking for a while, he saw a faint light shining through the gap of a sliding door in the corridor.

It was a wood-floored room, called the 'Bellflower Room' by the Tsuchimikado family. The butterfly hovered in front of the sliding door, and the sliding door opened as Harutora approached.

The light spilling out of the room was the light from candles.

The room was about twelve tatami mats[16], and there was an altar set up inside with a yorishiro[17], sakaki[18] and gohei for worship. There were also various instruments displayed around it, hanging scrolls with

incantations written on them, and several candles on the altar with softly swaying flames that dimly lit the room.

The interior of the room gave off a mildewy odor mixed with the smell of the heat and rain, but at the same time he could smell the elegant aroma of the drifting incense.

Natsume sat in the center of the room.

Harutora was a bit surprised. Natsume had taken off her original clothes, changing into the pure white and red Japanese hakama of a shrine maiden, kneeling and preparing a talisman that had been placed on the floor. The butterfly flew before Natsume, stopping on the floor, and returned to a small shikigami charm.

"......Natsume."

Natsume slowly raised her head, hearing Harutora call out. Her black hair slid down soundlessly in the flickering orange candlelight.

The butterfly shikigami seemed to be a simple shikigami manipulated by Natsume, or in other words...

"Your spiritual power recovered?"

"Yes. There should be no problems getting through tonight, though it hasn't recovered completely."

"So you mean you want to guard the altar?"

"....."

Natsume had no reply. That answer showed even more clearly her determination to go.

It was silent inside the room, though the sound of the rain outside was faintly audible. The room was permeated with an atmosphere of seclusion from the outside world.

The area seemed as if it was covered by a layer of tranquility, and inside this barrier, the passing of time was only showed by the swaying of the candlelight and the sound of the burning incense.

"......Harutora-kun, were you hurt? You look like you were injured..."

"Ah, I'm alright, I'm just like this because I ran over here."

Natsume looked surprised when she heard those words. She showed her shock, shaking her head and taking a towel placed by the side to give to Harutora. Harutora took the towel, infinitely grateful.

"......Sorry for having you return home alone in that kind of condition."

Harutora rubbed his head with the towel, apologizing to Natsume.

Natsume quickly spoke with a firm tone, as if reproaching him: "I know."

"The driver told me about the situation back then. When I woke up in the car, I was really scared..... I couldn't calm down after hearing the driver's explanation . I spoke to you in the cafe, so why did you have to come here?"

She seemed truly mad, her words barbed as usual.

Right now, Harutora was grateful from the bottom of his heart for Natsume's lecture. He had just listened to her in the cafe, but it felt abnormally long ago.

A bitter, self-deprecating feeling passed through his chest.

If he hadn't come here, Hokuto wouldn't have died, and the days that were now forever lost could have continued.

".....I'm really useless."

"....."

Harutora muttered powerlessly, and the angry Natsume inadvertently pursed her lips upon seeing that.

Then, her countenance relaxed slightly.

"Didn't you stay behind to learn who won between the 'Child Prodigy' and the Mystical Investigators? Judging by your appearance, it seems like it wasn't a good outcome."

".....Yeah....."

Harutora replied dully, sitting heavily on the floor.

He wasn't in the mood to look at Natsume, letting the towel on his head cover his face, and retelling the magic battle he had just witnessed.

The Mystical Investigators' loss. Suzuka summoning the 'Armored Juggernaut'. The contents of his and Suzuka's conversation, and the full story of how he had tried to persuade Suzuka.

Though he was hesitant, he still spoke of the event with Hokuto.

To avoid a long story, he spoke of everything he had witnessed truthfully.

As well as what had happened to one of his most important friends.

Natsume listened silently without interrupting Harutora's words.

The candle burned behind her back, and shadows fell across her face because she was backlit. Hazy shadows swayed on her pretty face, and her eyes shone with a mysterious radiance.

Natsume's look didn't change from the start, and she calmly listened to everything, nodding only when Harutora had finished speaking.

"......I see, she brought out an 'Armored Juggernaut'..... "

"Do you know about that thing?"

"I only know of the name. She probably took the shikigami that was in custody for research purposes. It originally wasn't a shikigami that a single person could manipulate..... Worthy of the 'Child Prodigy'."

Natsume spoke softly, and her tone was unusually gentle, perhaps concerned about Harutora's feelings.

"Is there a way to defeat it?'

"I don’t know, all I know is that it would be extremely difficult."

"......Even so, you're going to perform your ' responsibility' as fully as possible?"

"......Right."

Natsume replied with a clear, brief tone, without a trace of hesitation.

The similarly-aged Natsume annoyed him because of this. Why would Natsume be so different from him? When they were small, Harutora had always taken the lead, but now she was already this strong.

Her responsibility as a member of the Tsuchimikado family. Her duty as the heir.

But, was that it?

Why Natsume was this strong, and why she firmly upheld her 'responsibility'.

Could it be because she was Yakou's.....

...Tch.

Harutora closed his eyes tightly, shaking his head, flinging away his confusion.

He had never been someone to keep things inside him. He made his decision, pulling off the towel draped over his head and looking at Natsume. Natsume blinked in surprise at Harutora's sudden motions.

"W, What is it? Let me first say that whatever you say, you won't stop me from upholding my duty as the heir. This is my responsibility, since I'm a member of the Tsuchimikado family."

".....Is that it?"

"Huh? O, Of course, because the Taizan Fukun Ritual is a dangerous ceremony, and I can't allow....."

Natsume's voice became weaker and weaker under the pressure of Harutora's firm gaze.

"Natsume, you're this firm about your 'responsibility' because you're Yakou's reincarnation, right?"

Harutora asked, both eyes staring intently at Natsume.

"Ha....."

Natsume's reaction was intense.

Her wide, almond-shaped eyes blinked, and her momentary shock rapidly disappeared, her entire body showing a firm but not unaffected presence.

She straightened her back, a sincere look emerging on her face. Maybe she had always feared but long since known that she would be asked this question.

She looked straight back into Harutora's eyes, giving him an answer.

".....Harutora-kun, I don't know if I'm Yakou's reincarnation either."

Harutora nodded his head upon hearing Natsume's response.

Harutora was serious. Since his childhood friend had chosen to sincerely answer this presumptuous question, he had to show the same sincerity.

"You have no memories at all relating to Yakou?"

"Right. What's more, current magic can't prove whether Yakou was truly reincarnated or not, nor can it find out whether I am the reincarnation..... You already heard those rumors about me?"

Natsume checked. Harutora nodded, making a 'nn' sound.

"Actually, I only learned about that rumor today, so I'm not very clear on it."

"I'm not too clear on how many people know about it or how many people actually believe it either. I asked my father, but he refused to tell me. But, that rumor was already around by the time I was born."

"Around by the time you were born? Not spread after people learned about your amazing talent?"

"Right, my talent isn't much. Don't be mistaken, I consider my efforts extraordinary, and I'm a minor celebrity. Honestly, the rumor spread into an uproar because of this..... At least, from what I know, there are only rumors about me being Yakou's reincarnation."

".....I see..... So that's how it is."

Harutora muttered, replying ambiguously.

He had only learned of his childhood friend's secret now. Natsume wasn't simply a successor of the main family, the burden 'Yakou's reincarnation' had accompanied her from the day she was born.

He remembered the words he had just spoken to Suzuka. 'All of society will raise its voice to condemn your brother - not just the Onmyou Agency, and he will have to live on pitifully like that.' ...What pained him was , couldn't those words he had dissuaded Suzuka with be applied to Natsume as well?

".....Born in the Tsuchimikado main family, elected the family heir, 'maybe' Yakou's reincarnation - that is me. So

I cannot let her go, as if I let her have what she desires, it would basically be denying my own existence and my position."

Natsume smiled emptily after saying this. She smiled as if letting down the burden from her shoulders, candidly and sincerely.

But, it was a self-mocking smile on her face.

"......You could call me a person without a 'self'. My position is complicated, and I have no will or desires of my own, and maybe I am a soulless form like a shikigami ."

"Natsume....."

The empty smile on his childhood friend's face deeply pricked Harutora's heart.

A shikigami with no soul, only a form. Those words called forth Hokuto's image into Harutora's brain.

Hokuto was a shikigami. But he had never believed Hokuto didn't have a soul.

On the other hand, Natsume was a person, but believed she didn't have a soul.

A person like a shikigami, a shikigami like a person.

However--

"I really don't get it."

"......Huh?"

Natsume trembled in surprise - because Harutora's gaze was fiercely staring at her.

"I really don't get it, is there that big of a difference between shikigami and humans? Hokuto that I mentioned just now actually was a shikigami. Even so, Hokuto is Hokuto. You're the same, right, Natsume? You are yourself. Or are you saying that all this time that I've known you for is a lie? It's all imaginary?"

"H, Harutora-kun....."

Harutora got angry at the tongue-tied Natsume - "No." He continued speaking:

"If everything was a lie, then whatever, since I'm an idiot and I don't understand what's true and what's a lie - More importantly, real or fake, fake or real, isn't the most important part that you exist, whether you're real or fake ?"

Harutora put effort into speaking his true thoughts, and half of those words were spoken to himself.

When he had ran here a doubt had endlessly tormented him. He had finally chosen to look at that doubt, facing the problem directly, thinking carefully, and accepting the answer that he got.

Before he realized it, he himself was teary-eyed.

Since Hokuto had disappeared, this was the first time he had cried. Something burning spilled out of his frozen body, slipping down his cheek.

"Harutora-kun....."

Even if Natsume didn't know what was wrong, her gaze still pointed firmly at Harutora.

She hadn't averted her gaze out of worry for Harutora's feelings. She focused on looking at her

confused, hesitant, stumbling-but-moving-forward childhood friend as if she were telling herself she couldn't avert her eyes.

Harutora had made this girl worry. He forced himself to smile, wiping his tears.

"I, In any case, how can you say you don't have a 'self'? You're stubborn and you always get mad, and you're always lecturing - are you going to deny that because of your position? Then you'd be lying, and how much can you lie to yourself?"

"I, I'm not.....!"

Natsume opened her mouth to deny it. Her cheeks were flushed, but she didn't strongly refute it, so it seemed that she actually had some self-awareness.

Harutora grinned without hiding it, feeling this was a bit humorous. Natsume, whose gaze crossed with his, was also infected by his grin, showing a light smile.

He noticed that the distance between him and Natsume had shortened.

When the two had played together - She had been a little girl always following Harutora around, listening to his every word.

After understanding many things, that little girl from before and the girl in front of him overlapped in Harutora's mind, connecting. The past and the present merged into one, and the originally forgotten childhood friend now became clearer than ever to his eyes.

".....But, I have something I have to say. Born in the Tsuchimikado main family, elected the next heir, maybe Yakou's reincarnation - those aren't all of you, but rather those are a part of you. You're troubled by not having a self, stubborn, always getting mad, always lecturing..... Those are all you, and there are definitely many other parts that I don't know, and they will continue to increase in the future. The complete Natsume is only made by adding all those parts together."

Harutora spoke, nodding his head at Natsume.

Natsume stared unblinkingly, sincerely making a soft noise: "Nn....."

Harutora originally hadn't known that Hokuto was a shikigami, but even if he knew her true identity, the former Hokuto wouldn't just disappear like that.

Natsume was the same. Even if he knew the rumors about her, the irritable and headstrong childhood friend Natsume wouldn't just vanish. Also, wasn't Natsume in front of him right now?

The incense made a subtle noise in the candlelight.

Harutora exhaled deeply.

He closed his eyes, straightened his back, and stood tall.

"Natsume, I have something to ask of you."

Harutora's tone was serious, and Natsume went on alert, her face becoming tense again.

"......It's no use even if you stop me, I'll still go to the altar, because this is 'me'."

"I get that, I won't stop you. That's not what I want to ask of you."

"I, I also won't permit you to come with me to the altar, didn't you fail to persuade her? I'm thankful that you're this worried about me, but to bring you--"

"Natsume."

Harutora interrupted Natsume's apologetic tone, saying his request.

"Let me become your shikigami."

Natsume was shocked speechless.

Harutora's look was serious, and he repeated it again. He clearly stated the words that he had believed he would never say - the words that he had been contemplating for many years.

"Please. Let me become your shikigami right now."

He could only do this, Harutora repeated inside his heart.

Natsume didn't plan on bringing an outsider to the site of a magic battle, but since she had resolved to sacrifice herself for her Tsuchimikado family responsibility, it was impossible that she would disregard Harutora if he brought out the branch family tradition. Harutora wanted to act together with Natsume, that was his only option.

Natsume froze still, swallowing loudly.

Her neck was stiff, and her eyes were wide, gazing at Harutora's face. She was dazed for a while before she forced herself to move her intent stare away from Harutora, looking at the floor.

"......Do you still remember?"

"Huh? O, Of course. Didn't you also call me a liar--"

"......In other words, you understood the meaning behind those words?"

"O, Of course....."

Just then, Natsume stood up fiercely with a clatter. Harutora almost jumped in surprise, raising his head to look at his childhood friend.

Natsume's black hair was messy, and her eyes stared fiercely at Harutora as if they would spew flame.

"......In that case, why, why do you now.....!"

Because of her excessive agitation, she couldn't even speak clearly.

Her lips tightened, her hands clenched into fists, her fingers whitening from her force. She turned around so her back faced Harutora, like she was afraid of continuing to look, as if she would be unable to control her emotions.

The soft candlelight illuminated his childhood friend's profile.

Her white-garbed back shook intensely.

Harutora couldn't say anything for some time, as he hadn't expected Natsume to have such an intense reaction.

But--

--Natsume, you.....

Why do you only say so now?

Those words stabbed painfully at Harutora's heart.

Natsume had always borne the responsibility of a Tsuchimikado family heir, and not only this, as the rumors of Yakou's reincarnation had always pestered her . In that kind of situation Harutora had agreed to become Natsume's shikigami, but then had broken the agreement of his own accord.

Anyways, it was just children playing around..... He couldn't help but recognize that his attitude towards this matter had been quite irresponsible.

But, Natsume was different. She had endured the pressure around her, staying firm to her beliefs, continuing to wait.

Natsume's reproach 'Liar' had made Harutora feel guilty, but he had never thought about what kind of feelings the indomitable Natsume was bearing as she tearfully called him a liar.

...So that's why she criticized me.....

Maybe she had spoken true, and he really was bringing it up too late.

But, even if it was late--

Even if it was late, he couldn't back down.

".....Listen to me, Natsume."

Harutora straightened his back, promising.

"I really like my current life. I go to school every day and pass idle and unremarkable days, and I like that kind of life. Since I'm not a spirit-seer, my parents didn't complain either, and since I had friends who were relaxed like me, I thought it would be fine this way."

He spoke choppily towards Natsume's back. He reorganized the words he had spoken to Hokuto while he spoke them.

"But, I was wrong. Even if I'm not a spirit-seer and I was born in the branch family, I'm still a member of the Tsuchimikado family. Everything that happened this time was a result of my choice to hide from myself. What

I told you just now also applies to myself, Tsuchimikado Harutora - that is me, without a doubt."

This was something he had spoken with Hokuto about , something that she had fought with Harutora about, and something she had firmly told him.

"Right now, I finally understand this, I think I have finally come around."

I want to avenge Hokuto.

I want to stop Suzuka's evil.

I want to do whatever I can - even if I have a meager strength - to protect Natsume.

Harutora's heart only held these thoughts.

"So, Natsume, let me become your shikigami, and I'll perform the responsibility that I ought."

Please - Harutora requested towards the back of his childhood friend.

When doing what you believe is right, if you believe you made a mistake, correct it.

In this complicated world, doing so might be infinitely difficult even if it seemed simple. But in the end, there were no other ways other than facing it with hard work.

Try and try again, and continue to fail.

And after thinking about it again, find your own answer.

After a long while...

Natsume's back no longer trembled, and her body gradually relaxed.

She quietly called out the word: "...Bakatora."

"Huh?"

Natsume had called quietly and furtively, and upon hearing Harutora ask about it, she just replied "..... Nothing", slowly turning around to face Harutora.

Natsume's back was to the faint candlelight, and her face was again shrouded by shadow. Clear eyes stared at her childhood friend from her backlit face.

The white-garbed shrine maiden's black hair swayed as she kneeled before Harutora.

"......Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"You will become a Tsuchimikado - my - shikigami not just for now, but for life, do you have the resolve?"

"I do."

Whether human or shikigami, Tsuchimikado Harutora was Tsuchimikado Harutora, and the days that he had enjoyed in the past wouldn't vanish.

"I won't lie again." Harutora said.

Natsume closed her eyes upon hearing those words.

After a period of silence, the corners of her mouth rose in a light smile, and her eyes opened.

"......Of course, a shikigami will be punished if he lies, after all."

As Natsume said this, she stared at Harutora while showing a look that carried both tenderness and ferocity. Harutora had never seen that expression of her, and his heart leaped.

Then, her gaze turned serious.

"Understood. Then - Harutora-kun, I will now appoint you as my shikigami."

Natsume solemnly declared this, reaching her hand into her clothing and taking out a small knife. Harutora flinched, surprised by this sudden motion.

The candlelight danced on the steel.

Natsume brought the small knife to her lips, lightly kissing the knife and letting the blade slide along her lips .

"N, Natsume!?"

"......Close your eyes."

Natsume's tone was serious, and blood wet her pink lips. Even with his incredible anxiety, Harutora followed her orders and closed his eyes.

The sound of the knife being placed on the ground reached his ears along the soft sound of clothing rubbing against itself, and then the feeling of Natsume moving forward. Harutora's heartbeat quickened, and he held his eyes shut with force.

Then, he heard the sound of Natsume murmuring.

An incantation.

His childhood friend's clear, crisp voice seemed like it was reading the words of a prayer, bringing forth an ancient melody. It was strange melody that made his head spin but feel like his head was crystal clear. Her voice became fingers drawing on Harutora's body and entering him[19].

"...By the name of the ancestor Abe no Seimei, you, Tsuchimikado Harutora, become my, Tsuchimikado Natsume's shikigami..."

Natsume finished the incantation with an extremely serious tone.

Was it over? Harutora wondered, but it actually hadn't finished yet. He felt thin fingers lightly holding his

cheeks, and these were actual fingers, not just a feeling. Then, he felt Natsume approach rapidly.

The delicate lips dyed with blood approached him.

They were right in front of his left eye. Natsume held Harutora's face in place with both hands, kissing Harutora's closed left eye. Harutora's body unconsciously stiffened upon realizing this.

From a distance less than ten centimeters away from Harutora, a smile quietly bloomed on Natsume's lips, her tongue licking the nick cut open by the knife.

Her bloody tongue timidly reached out, touching Harutora's cheek right under his left eye.

He felt goosebumps spring up over his entire body.

His mind completely focused on the small, moist, and tender sensation. Natsume lightly and slowly moved her tongue, tracing a pattern.

A pentagram.

It was a magical pattern representing the five elements of yin and yang, known in Onmyoudou as the 'star mark'

, 'Seimei's Bellflower Mark', or 'Seimei's Mark'. After being used by Abe no Seimei, it later became the crest of the Tsuchimikado family.

Her presence stayed on his face. She hadn't moved her tongue away, slowly and cautiously tracing the pentagram, and she only let her tongue leave his face once she had truly drawn the final stroke and completed the pentagram pattern.

A string of saliva mixed with blood stretched between them, and Natsume's face reddened instantly once she noticed, hurriedly removing it. Harutora almost stopped breathing during that time.

Harutora's left cheek had a freshly marked pentagon, right underneath his left eye.

"......It's done."

"......Th, Thanks....."

Never having thought that this kind of ceremony was required for becoming a shikigami, Harutora's jumping heart couldn't calm down, and he didn't dare to look directly at Natsume's face.

Natsume moved back, calling out:

"...Harutora-kun."

"Y, Yes."

"With this, you are my shikigami."

The candlelight flickered as it glowed in the slightly damp darkness.

Her face was still red, her head gazing upwards. She spoke those words as if savoring a fruit she had finally picked.

Suddenly, Harutora thought of his childhood long ago, and he felt restless as if he had swallowed a fist-sized candy.

Heavy, painful, and unable to spit it out--

A dangerous and sweet sensation.

Harutora was in an absentminded daze, and Natsume coughed.

"Well..... Harutora-kun, can you 'see'?"

Natsume hid her shyness, changing the topic. Harutora was deeply puzzled, and he didn't notice the change until he was about to ask.

He saw it.

He jumped in surprise. He saw the clear aura radiating from Natsume's whole body. No, it wasn't quite right to say he could see it, but rather he could feel the aura.

The scene reflected in his eyes was a bit different from before, and his eyes still couldn't see the color or shape of the aura from Natsume's body, but he knew. He could perceive with a different feeling from sight that there was aura there.

"This, could this be.....?"

"Right, I used magic to make Harutora into a spirit-seer. You can see it, right? That's a success."

Harutora couldn't help but be shocked, his mouth agape.

He stared dumbfounded at his childhood friend who was still a bit embarrassed like it was his first time seeing her. Natsume shrank back even more upon being stared at so openly.

"Is this spirit-seeing?"

The process was far simpler than he had expected. Or should he say that Natsume's power was striking? The talent that had troubled Harutora for many years was now housed in his left eye.

"......Beautiful."

"--B, Beautiful!?"

"So aura is this beautiful."

"......Ah......Oh, it's that....."

He didn't know why Natsume said those words lethargically and a bit angrily, but Harutora didn't pay attention to it. He first felt surprised, then slowly felt moved.

The appearance of the Bellflower Room they were in was hugely different from just before. He noticed that the entire room was filled with a holy aura, a harmonious, stable, and solemn aura. The world that he had heard about but had never actually felt was now clearly placed before him.

This was the world of spirit-seers.

This was the world of Onmyouji.

...So it's like this, I.....

He inadvertently thought of the wish that Hokuto had written on the ema yesterday.

'I hope that Harutora becomes an Onmyouji.'

No one knew whether Hokuto's wish would come true or not, but at the least he was standing at the starting point.

He had only taken the first step now, after Hokuto disappeared.

...I'm sorry, Hokuto.

He felt his eyes moistening, but he clenched his jaw, telling himself not to cry again.

Just then, the round mirror placed on the altar behind Natsume cracked, making a sound.

Natsume's face tensed up again, and Harutora looked at the altar in surprise. There were three mirrors on the altar, and other than the one just now, there was one other mirror that had already cracked.

"What's going on?"

"......Those are the barriers I put down to guard the altar before meeting you at the cafe today. Two of the mirrors are cracked now, meaning that there's only one barrier left. We should move as quickly as possible."

Suzuka was closing in on the shrine. Harutora readied himself.

The two of them looked at each other, rising simultaneously.

"......Let's go."

Natsume spoke, and Harutora nodded silently.

At some time, the sound of the rain had fallen silent.

Chapter 5 - Soul Calling

Part 1

The hazy moon was visible from a gap between groups of clouds.

The typhoon had just passed, the wind and rain had ceased, and the moon illuminated the surrounding clouds, making them seem large and misty. The soft moonlight shone on the trees, making the after-rain moisture on the leaves sparkle. The vast, dark paddy was like a silver mirror.

Right now, Harutora was heading to the 'Imperial Hill' altar with Natsume.

Natsume had walked from the Bellflower Room into the courtyard of the mansion, taking out an ancient shikigami charm and summoning a shikigami that showed itself as a white horse. It was the most majestic horse that Harutora had seen in his life. Its body was outfitted with a black saddle and red reins, and it was a horse that was prestigious enough that no one would doubt it if it were dedicated to the gods.

It was the Tsuchimikado shikigami - Yukikaze.

It was a high-level manmade shikigami from the angle of 'General Onmyoudou'. But its origins were far before ' General Onmyoudou', even much more ancient than ' Imperial Onmyoudou'.

Natsume mounted the horse first, and Harutora sat behind her. Then, Natsume snapped the reins, and Yukikaze rapidly leaped off the ground, galloping off as if he didn't even feel the weight of the two. Actually, this was a bit inaccurate, as Yukikaze's hooves didn't even touch the ground.

Yukikaze circled from the courtyard to the front of the mansion, leaping out of the main entrance and rushing down the stone steps without touching the ground. When they rushed off the stairs, the distance to the ground became a bit higher again.

Yukikaze stayed at a height of about ten meters, galloping like the wind over a road between the forests and paddy fields. The scenery nearby was all visible because of their height, but Harutora only looked down a couple times. His hands wrapped around the waist of Natsume in front of him - before Yukikaze had leaped

out of the entrance, he had hesitated about what to do - and he clung to Natsume for dear life.

"Um, ah, th, this is pretty nice!"

"Harutora-kun, your hands haven't stopped shaking."

"D, Don't mind me! On the other hand, is the Imperial Hill very far?"

"No, with this child's speed, we'll be there in moments. "

Natsume solemnly tightened her grip on the reins. A crimson belt tied up her white clothes, showing her thin arms. Her imposing appearance wasn't like a shrine maiden, but more like a young female warrior.

A white horse galloping through the moonlit air, and the girl who rode it - It looked like the picturesque scenery from a dream no matter how he looked at it. Unfortunately, the addition of a shikigami whose entire body shook as he tightly grabbed on to the girl destroyed the picture - Harutora thought as his entire body shook, tightly grabbing on to Natsume.

But, Harutora also had his responsibilities. Right now, he was carrying a trunk used for practitioners on his back - a kind of woven bamboo trunk. Inside it was entirely Tsuchimikado ancestral tools, and he also wore a sword on his waist, with a bow hung over his shoulder.

These were all equipment that Natsume had prepared to deal with a magical battle before they had departed. Harutora was like a foot soldier accompanying the general, and he was also carrying his box of charms.

He had also contacted Touji.

He only realized right before they left the mansion that his phone was filled with calls from Touji, which had all arrived when he had been running to the mansion. Maybe Touji had noticed that Harutora wasn't picking up his phone - knowing that he couldn't pick up his phone in his current circumstances, he had changed to text messages, sending him the important information using texts.

Touji had first gone to the construction site that had become a battlefield, woken up the Mystical Investigators, and then contacted the police again. The Mystical Investigators were unable to perform

temporarily due to their spiritual power being stolen. The typhoon had departed earlier than first predicted, so the assistance sent from Tokyo seemed to be on course to arrive this evening.

He should be worried and angry that Harutora hadn't contacted him, but his text messages didn't contain anything mentioning that.

Harutora was grateful for his friend and sent a message of confirmation, which just contained 'Sorry, I've troubled you a lot, I'm going to give you a break now .' After sending it, he immediately turned off his phone.

Then.

"...! Harutora-kun."

Natsume called out, and he quickly raised his head. There was a familiar-looking truck stopped before them.

The truck had been carelessly abandoned by the roadside, and the truck bed was full of pieces of a container. There were traces of devastated trees all over the road leading from the container to the hill in the distance.

These were traces left by that Tsuchigumo - the ' Armored Juggernaut'. Judging by this, the mundane, uninteresting hill over there was the location of the Tsuchimikado-established altar, the 'Imperial Hill'.

"Right, it's that! Did you see that spider monster?"

"I haven't, it seems that she already headed to the altar. "

"Let's follow!"

"Okay, we'll head directly to the altar."

Giddy up - Natsume uttered an adorable yet brave sound, swinging the horse's reins. The shikigami quickly bolted like an arrow upon receiving its master’s orders, charging up the hillside and advancing towards the Imperial Hill. They flew at a height above the treetops, following the tracks of the Tsuchigumo.

Then, a brittle shattering sound came from Natsume's chest. The third mirror that she had placed in her chest had also broken.

"...It seems like the last barrier was also destroyed."

"I know. But..... it's right ahead!"

Just as Natsume was full of remorse, the hilltop of the Imperial Hill ahead of them appeared in the night.

There was a circular, grassy field on the hilltop that the trees had been removed from. The field was surrounded by tall trees, but a stone plaza had been set in the center, encircled on all four sides by torii.

It was the Imperial Hill's altar. Bonfires had been ignited on all four corners of the plaza, seemingly by Suzuka.

There were two human figures preparing for a ceremony by the altar, and there was also a small figure giving orders.

They could make out Suzuka, the black suit-wearing simple shikigami, and the general-use shikigami 'Asura' that Suzuka had manipulated at the festival.

"Found you!"

Harutora shouted. It didn't seem like Suzuka had heard him shout, but she turned around to look in Harutora's direction.

Harutora wondered if his eyes had failed upon seeing the girl's figure again. Aura poured out of Suzuka's body, like a whirling hurricane centered on her.

Intense and brilliant - but a unique, obviously imbalanced aura. Harutora had just become a spirit-seer, but he could directly feel that she was very powerful. That was the aura given off by one of the Twelve Divine Generals, the 'Child Prodigy'.

Suzuka's aura suddenly swayed intensely the moment she looked at Harutora and Natsume, as if it were doing a somersault.

"Why did you..... come?"

Suzuka gnashed her teeth, her childlike face twisting and showing a mournful anger, and forcefully swung her right hand to the side.

It wasn't Harutora or Natsume who felt danger in the nick of time, but rather the veteran Yukikaze who had served the Tsuchimikado family for many years.

Yukikaze jumped up before entering the field, turning its body - never mind Harutora, even Natsume was

almost flung off the horse. A metal pillar shot like a cannon through the position where Yukikaze had just been.

The steel Tsuchigumo Armored Juggernaut had just attacked them. It had hid its body inside the forest for an ambush, ready to attack at any time.

"Yukikaze! Pull back!"

Natsume frantically reined in, and Yukikaze hastily leaped into the air, galloping up.

Tsuchigumo's attack failed, and its swinging body emerged in the field.

Its steel body seemed smooth and shiny in the light of the bonfires. Its body was huge, but its structure was unsuited to attacking upwards, so it wouldn't be hard to avoid its attacks as long as they were careful about the spider silk it shot out from inside its armor.

But--

"Natsume, we won't be able to get close to the altar like this!"

"....."

Natsume frowned, surveying the field.

Tsuchigumo wouldn't chase if Yukikaze escaped over the trees, but if they recklessly approached the field, Tsuchigumo would react cleverly and ward them off. Perhaps it had received orders to prohibit anyone from entering the field, and it wouldn't be easy to destroy Tsuchigumo's steel defenses.

Suzuka stood on the stone plaza, looking fiercely at Harutora and Natsume, but the two shikigami behind her busied themselves to prepare the altar.

Harutora couldn't clearly and thoroughly see the situation because of the distance from the altar. He could only see that a table had been set up on the altar with several offerings on it. There were pieces of silver in a scarlet bowl, white silk scrolls, a saddle made for a horse, and paper. He could also see taiko drums and instruments placed by the side.

A big, thin parcel had been placed in the center of the altar.

A cold shiver inadvertently went down Harutora's back upon seeing that parcel whose exterior was plastered with charms. That charm-wrapped parcel was just as large as a child.

"It couldn't be....."

That should be Suzuka's dead brother.

Suzuka was trying to reproduce an ancient ceremony, but to Harutora's eyes, her commanding of the ceremony seemed immature like she was playing house, but with her brother's body replacing the role of a doll. The game she was playing was ugly, ridiculous, and heartbreaking.

...Damn.....

"Dairenji Suzuka!"

Harutora inadvertently yelled. Natsume who held on to the reins almost jumped in surprise, looking behind her in shock.

"I told you! Even if you revive your brother, you won't be happy from it. Stop obsessing over it, wake up!"

"Shut up! I also said I would definitely kill you the next time!"

Suzuka straightened her small body, shouting loudly.

"You're really annoying! My life is my own, and neither my parents or anyone else can tell me what to do with it! I'll decide if I want to die or not! You won't stop me however much you say, I will revive my brother!"

Her anger became aura, as if channeling a raging flame , but the raging anger only burned Suzuka, and not anyone else.

The intense flame rapidly swelled from Suzuka's small body, and maybe soon after, the flame would extend from her body, becoming giant tongues of flame to engulf others.

But--

"You can't do that kind of thing, no, you shouldn't even try!"

Natsume's remark was clear and firm.

The moon palely illuminated her face. Harutora looked at her, and Suzuka also quickly shot her burning gaze towards her.

Natsume didn't flinch, her attitude still serious.

"...Modern Onmyoudou prohibits magic concerning souls, and of course, the spiritual disaster brought about by Yakou is one reason, but more importantly, we shouldn't deepen our relationship with such magic. People shouldn't interfere with others' souls, because that is not the territory of man!"

Suzuka's face was irritated, and she glared fiercely at Natsume who made those remarks from Yukikaze.

"......Are you also a Tsuchimikado? I don't know where you came from, but you also came to stop me?"

Tsuchigumo hadn't moved. Natsume stared at Suzuka without blinking, continuing to speak with a firm tone:

"In the past, people harbored respect for the gods, feeling a natural gratitude and fear in their hearts, having an irrational confidence for these entities above human understanding. They believed in prayer, so it was

effective. No, it should be said that they created prayer. That magic was only effective because it was cast by the people of that time, and the people who live in the world now won't succeed just by copying the ceremony!"

Natsume predicted Suzuka's failure without even thinking. Harutora gazed at Natsume, extremely surprised.

Just then, he finally noticed something.

...Right, this person was an 'Onmyouji'.

Of course, Natsume was just an Onmyou Academy student, and she wasn't an official Onmyouji yet.

But, forgetting about official accreditation for now, and also forgetting about magical skill, what was an Onmyouji in the most basic sense? He hadn't once thought about this problem in the past, but the figure of his childhood friend now led him to ponder.

On the other hand.

"You annoyances....."

Suzuka on the ground below audibly gnashed her teeth upon hearing Natsume's speech. The bonfire next to her blazed with light, casting foreboding shadows across her body.

"The Tsuchimikado family was the one always responsible for holding the Taizan Fukun Ritual, and it was also the Tsuchimikado family that revived the ceremony. Are you saying that the Tsuchimikado can do it, but I can't? Don't joke around!"

The girl's voice was fragile, as if she would crumble at any time.

As her words fell, the Asura and the black-clothed man who had originally been silently preparing the ceremony stopped moving.

The ceremony was already prepared.

"Dairenji Suzuka! Stop the ritual right now!"

"Shut up, I'll definitely perform the ceremony better than you Tsuchimikado, leave if you don't want to die!"

Then, Suzuka began chanting an incantation. The words she chanted weren't for the ritual, but were Onmyoudou incantations.

The black-clothed man simple shikigami went limp from being unable to withstand the pressure given off by the magical energy, its external shape becoming ruined.

The Asura standing next to it absorbed the crumbling outer form of the black-clothed shikigami, and the two shikigami merged into one, with long, insectile wings even sprouting from Asura's back.

Natsume's eyes widened in surprise.

"How is that possible!? You can freely change the manmade shikigami produced by the Onmyou Agency?"

Harutora was clueless, but all he knew was that Suzuka's strength really was nothing to look down on.

The merged Asura bent its body, leaping strongly into the night sky and flying straight for Harutora and Natsume.

"Damn! Natsume!"

Harutora hollered at Natsume, and Natsume manipulated the reins attentively.

They avoided the Asura flying into the sky, but Asura leaped to a position even higher up than Yukikaze and unleashed an attack while maintaining that height. Natsume had to make Yukikaze move lower.

"No good, Natsume, they're planning on attacking us from top and bottom!"

Harutora's warning was a step too late. Tsuchigumo who was on standby below quickly swung its leg in an attack upon seeing Yukikaze descend. Natsume frantically pulled on the reins, but that movement restricted Yukikaze's movement, making Yukikaze slip in midair.

--Damn!

They couldn't avoid this. Once he saw Tsuchigumo's leg attacking, Harutora quickly drew the sword from his waist.

He leaned forward, as if trying to throw himself off the horse, and swung the sword forcefully at Tsuchigumo who was attacking from below.

With one swing, the sword absorbed all of the aura in his body.

The aura collected in the blade, shooting out from the tip. Tsuchigumo's leg was slashed, sending sparks flying, and pushing it back.

Harutora felt a strong recoil up his arm. The steel leg had been cut open, and the sword had carved out a trace on it as if it had been scorched. Though he had been the one who hit the enemy with the sword, Harutora still couldn't help but stare blankly.

"W, What is this? It's too powerful!"

"It's a 'Protection Sword'! It's a specially forged, age-old spiritual sword!"

"Huh? Really? It just got chipped by the strike just now --"

"No way!?"

"Ah, but it was just a bit! A small bit!"

"Uuu..... S, Since it's a crisis, it's okay even if you break it!"

Natsume managed to shout angrily. But was it really okay to break it! Natsume's look had been obviously stern when she had turned around to say the words 'no way'.

The enemy continued attacking, and Natsume manipulated the reins for dear life, an obviously incredibly dangerous scene to anyone who was watching . Harutora almost fell off the horse a few times, and swing by swing, damage built up on the Protection Sword.

The Protection Sword seemed like a strong tool, as it could unleash a strong power even if an outsider like Harutora used it. It was just that a large amount of aura was absorbed from him with every slash, and the fatigue continuing to accumulate was no trivial matter. When Harutora noticed, he was already tired and gasping for breath.

"This can't go on, Natsume! I can't handle it by myself anymore!"

"I know that!"

"Then you need to fight too!"

"Don't talk to me right now!"

Natsume didn't turn around. She was obviously struggling to cope with the combined attacks of Asura and Tsuchigumo. A cold sweat broke out in Harutora's heart.

...Hey hey, could she be bad at actual fights?

Her attitude was different from her usual calmness, and obvious anxiety had appeared on Natsume's expression. How ironic that he would see this unexpected side of his childhood friend in such a situation.

Then--

Crash. A noise sounding like it wanted to shatter the air reverberated from the stone plaza.

Suzuka had beat the taiko drum set on the altar, making a strange noise that sounded like it vibrated the blood itself. Suzuka then continued to swing the drumsticks, and the taiko boomed, echoing through the nighttime Imperial Hill.

Suzuka beat the taiko six times, and then blew a horn, whose deep sound contrasted with the penetrating sound of the taiko. The air shook, and the unnecessary dirt on the stone plaza vibrated, cleansing it.

Harutora who had become a spirit-seer knew that the sound contained magical energy, and he couldn't help but feel a chill upon hearing the sound of the horn that announced the start of battle.

"Oh no, the ceremony is beginning! We have to stop her quickly!"

"Wait, Natsume. From above!"

Natsume was focused on the altar, and suddenly Asura attacked from above. She quickly pulled in the reins, once again stealing away Yukikaze's freedom of movement.

The two shikigami were attacking in turns.

Yukikaze hurriedly raised its forelegs, leaning back while standing on its hind legs to avoid Asura's attack.

In that moment, Natsume was holding on to the reins, but Harutora who was swinging the sword had nowhere to stand. He was sent flying off with a 'waaah'.

He fell.

Natsume noticed Harutora fall off the horse and screamed, but Harutora had already begun dropping to the ground before he was able to make a sound.

But--

"Hokuto! Please!"

"...Hokuto?"

A light shone next to the galloping Yukikaze before Harutora even had time to doubt his ears. The light extended outwards like a fluid, leisurely flowing through the light sky.

A dazzling strip of gold floated in the night sky.

It was a dragon.

A dragon had appeared in the night sky in response to Natsume's summoning.

"...What.....?"

The dragon's body was almost ten meters, and there were two horn-like things on its head, with a long snout and golden scales covering its entire body. Though its four limbs were short, they had the sharp talons of an eagle. The dragon before him wasn't as large as those he had imagined, but other than in body size, this 'dragon' was completely identical to the mythical beasts depicted in Japanese myths or folk tales.

The dragon turned around after appearing, sliding underneath Harutora's body. Harutora hurriedly tossed aside the Protection Sword, grabbing on to the dragon's body.

The dragon's scales were hard, but it felt smooth. A soft yet tough being was swaying in his arms.

...Sh, Shikigami!?

Of course this was a shikigami. There was no other possibility.

But, even if it was a shikigami.....

"Hokuto? It's called Hokuto? Hey, Natsume, is this dragon.....!?"

Harutora raised his head, shouting at Natsume who was riding Yukikaze.

Natsume was already stretched thin trying to deal with Asura's attacks, but she still replied to Harutora's question after barely dodging an attack.

"She's my final trump card! The familiar who served generations of family heads and the Tsuchimikado guardian beast, one of the few modern true dragons!"

"T, True dragon....."

Harutora unconsciously forgot the matter of the name, gazing at the dragon he held on to.

The so-called servant shikigami were different from the mainstream manmade shikigami of 'General Onmyoudou', as they were deities, spirits, or beasts - more accurately, something that had possessed one of these names in the past - made into shikigami. In other

words, Hokuto hadn't been created by humans, but had formed naturally, and was an existence similar to a materialized deity.

The aura he could feel from Hokuto's body was indeed strong and fierce. Actually, it was a very terrifying feeling. Hokuto's long body had a perceptible, peculiar feeling of vigor, extremely different from an animal's.

...But, why was it called Hokuto?

Most would connect the Big Dipper to the name Hokuto[20], and the big dipper would often be compared to a 'dragon', with close ties to the stars that Onmyoudou worshipped. It seemed incredibly natural that a dragon shikigami would get the name Hokuto.

But, to Harutora's ears, this name felt extremely coincidental.

"Why didn't you summon this thing from the beginning!?"

"I can't completely control her! She doesn't listen to my orders, though she agreed to become my shikigami."

Natsume stared a bit resentfully at Hokuto as she spoke. The dragon ignored its master's words, looking down its nose at the Armored Juggernaut and the altar.

The dragon was clearly exuberant, and its appearance didn't seem to be because of its fighting spirit, but rather like it had seen an interesting and fun game. Not to mention its long tail was waving back and forth like an excited puppy's. Harutora grimaced.

".....Indeed, though this thing has courage, it doesn't have an ounce of tension."

"Hokuto! I order you to defeat the enemy shikigami, you should be able to, right?"

Natsume gave the order with a serious face - but Hokuto shook her head in incomprehension, looking at Natsume as if to ask: 'What enemy?'

But, Asura attacked again before Natsume had time to tell Hokuto what to deal with.

Yukikaze leaped aside without waiting for orders from the panicked Natsume, evading Asura's attack.

Hokuto was surprised by Asura's attack. It turned around, quickly taking Yukikaze's position, completely unheeding to the person on its back. Harutora yelled loudly, slipping down the dragon's body to its back leg region.

"Uwaaaah!"

"H, Hokuto!"

Natsume reprimanded Hokuto from the horse, but the dragon paid no heed, dashing through the night sky as Asura's opponent as a midair battle unfolded.

It seemed that Asura's attack had excited it, as it suddenly seemed clearly motivated.

"Th, This shikigami has such strong power, but isn't its personality a little too childish!?"

"It's dangerous! Harutora-kun, jump over here!"

"Don't be inconsiderate of me!"

Just as he cried out, Hokuto spun fiercely, and Harutora was sent flying from the dragon's body due to the centrifugal force.

This was his second time falling from the sky today. Natsume - actually, Yukikaze - rapidly rushed over.

"Uwaaaah!"

"H, Harutora-kun!"

Natsume spread her arms, catching Harutora in her arms.

The girl's small, delicate body held Harutora with all her power. She couldn't support the force of Harutora's fall, and almost fell down with him. Harutora frantically reached out his hand to grab Yukikaze's reins, and barely managed to avert the crisis.

"H, Harutora-kun, Harutora-kun~!"

"Natsume, stop yelling! You can let go, ouch, hey, you don't need to grab that tightly!?"

Natsume was using all her power to keep Harutora from falling to the ground, but Harutora was doing everything he could to keep both of them from falling off

the horse. Their bodies tangled together, destroying the balance, and Yukikaze dropped as it mustered the strength to rebalance itself.

Just then, Tsuchigumo attacked with its leg.

...Bastard!

Harutora had just dropped the Protection Sword, and now he thought flawlessly, immediately reaching his hand into his box of charms and flipping the lid open with his fingertip, fluidly drawing out a protective charm .

Once, he had practice throwing charms in front of the mirror every day, and those movements were still imprinted in his body even after abandoning that training.

"Order!"

Harutora shouted, throwing the charm out hard. The incantation meant 'swiftly enforce as law'[21], the Onmyoudou that the Mystical Investigators had also often used - the common word widely used in charm techniques.

Harutora's magical energy flowed in to the protective charm, creating a shining barrier of light.

The Armored Juggernaut's leg smashed through the barrier, but it bought enough time for Yukikaze to regain its balance. Yukikaze shifted its back, letting the two properly sit again, and just barely avoided Tsuchigumo's leg that came crashing through the barrier.

They descended to stay on the ground, but lowering their altitude was equivalent to entering Tsuchigumo's attack range. The next attack came accordingly, giving them no time to catch their breath.

Harutora peeled off Natsume who was still tightly wrapped around him, sitting back on the horse's rear, and then reached forward with his arms as if to hug Natsume.

"Ah! H, Harutora-kun...?"

"Natsume, I'll control the reins, I'll leave it to you to deal with the enemy!"

"Huh? Uh, okay!"

"Yukikaze, I'm counting on you!"

Harutora gripped Yukikaze's body with his legs, lashing the reins. Actually, he only controlled the reins this one time, and everything else was all Yukikaze's own judgment.

Once Yukikaze gained dominance, he immediately showed agility different from before. It jumped deftly through Tsuchigumo's chained attacks while carrying the two of them. When the stiff Natsume who was squeezed between Harutora's arms noticed this, she inadvertently froze on top of the horse.

"H, Harutora-kun, what did you do?"

"I didn't do anything, rather, I'm doing nothing at all."

With the panicked Natsume and the willful Hokuto, the most reliable of the individuals here - including Harutora - was undoubtedly Yukikaze. Regardless of whether it was a horse or shikigami, it needed room to act.

He looked up at the sky. Hokuto and Asura were still fighting to the death in the sky.

Of the two, Hokuto had an overwhelming advantage. Its movements were free like a fish in water, and its golden scales reflected the bonfires on the ground like glittering dust scattered in the night sky.

With this, Harutora and Natsume might be able to focus on dealing with Tsuchigumo.

"I don't have the time to look for the sword I dropped on the ground right now! Natsume, can you do anything to hold off that Tsuchigumo?"

"I, I do! Harutora-kun, give me the bow!"

After hearing Natsume's order, Harutora rapidly took off the bow hung over his shoulder and gave it to Natsume.

"What about arrows?"

"I don't need them. This is the 'Peach Bow', a peach wood exorcising bow imbued with magic, and I just need to release the bowstring at an enemy to attack. But, that will at most be able to hold it back, since the Armored Juggernaut's armor has strong magic resistance."

There weren't any actually effective tools to use before the military shikigami Armored Juggernaut. If they seriously wanted to defeat the Armored Juggernaut, they would need military-grade equipment at the least, and more importantly, the 'Peach Bow' was originally a tool for exorcism, equipment for dealing with spiritual disasters.

But...

"Then we just need to hold it off, there's no need to defeat it. Natsume, you're in charge of holding off Tsuchigumo, and Yukikaze, rush towards the altar if you get the chance, since in any case we definitely need to stop the ceremony!"

Of course, Suzuka's threat wasn't just limited to Tsuchigumo, and the possibility of winning against her with a head-on assault was very small.

But, even if she was a Divine General, she still needed to focus her mind to perform the Taizan Fukun Ritual, and if they impeded the ceremony, things weren't entirely hopeless.

"U, Understood. But, Harutora-kun, you're my shikigami, so I should be giving orders--"

"I know! Natsume, Yukikaze, let's go!"

Harutora ignored Natsume's mumbling, shouting loudly and shaking the reins.

The reins shook and Yukikaze instantly rushed forward fearlessly towards the giant Tsuchigumo several times larger than itself.

The surprised Natsume frantically took up the bow, but the arms that Harutora grasped the reins with blocked her front, so she was unable to draw the bow.

"Put your arms down!"

Saying this, she stood on the stirrups, stretching her upper body through the gap between Harutora's arms and the reins. Her black hair flapped like a banner as she stood on the horse.

Just then, spider silk shot out of the head area of Tsuchigumo's armor.

Yukikaze hurriedly backed off, making Natsume fall over backwards. Harutora grabbed the reins tight, crouched his body, and held Natsume's waist from behind as she fell.

"Ah! Th, That's my b-butt!"

"Don't worry about it, shoot!"

"......Uuu."

Her face red, Natsume took a shooting posture and released the bowstring at the approaching Tsuchigumo.

The Peach Bow made a pleasant sound.

Tssssss[22] - The air shook as Natsume's magical energy shot towards Tsuchigumo. The wave of tremendous magical energy became an invisible arrow, shooting into Tsuchigumo.

In Harutora's now spirit-seeing eyes, he saw the armor easily repel the magical energy, but once the Tsuchigumo was hit by the shockwave from the Peach Bow, it indeed

showed caution for a moment. The steel body didn't budge, but it seemed like its interior was suffering ‘lag’ effects, and its movements slowed as a result.

"It worked!?"

Yukikaze took the chance to speed up its gallop, planning on circling around Tsuchigumo's side and head directly for the altar.

Unfortunately, Tsuchigumo pushed out its back leg, blocking their advance.

Yukikaze turned at a right angle - Tsuchigumo moved sideways, chasing them while continuously slashing its spider legs. After Yukikaze pulled away from Tsuchigumo, it turned around again, once again galloping towards the altar.

Natsume released the string of the Peach Bow.

This time, her back was straight in a beautiful archery form. The released string contained a magical energy stronger than the previous time. Tsuchigumo took the attack head-on, and its movements became slow like it

had short-circuited. But, the enemy had learned for the second attack. Before Tsuchigumo's movements became slow, spider silk spewed from the samurai armor.

The spider silk flew at them from the front, and they had nowhere to run. Harutora threw out a charm just in time, repelling the spider silk with the barrier from a protective charm.

Harutora pulled Natsume down with the right hand he had thrown the charm with, and Natsume sat down hard on the saddle. At the same time, Yukikaze ducked its body down, passing below Tsuchigumo from underneath.

"...Did we make it!?"

He turned around, looking backwards. They had broken through Tsuchigumo, which quickly moved its eight legs, rapidly turning around. A fierce gaze stared at them through the samurai armor that hadn't succeeded in driving off the enemy.

Just as Tsuchigumo prepared to pursue them, a golden light swooped down from the sky.

It was Hokuto. Asura was being chewed in its sharp teeth, so it seemed that Hokuto had won the midair battle.

Hokuto crunched Asura apart, changing targets to Tsuchigumo. It didn't seem the least bit worried facing the Armored Juggernaut, and even the military shikigami had to stop in front of the violent aura that the dragon gave off.

"Incredible! That thing's pretty strong!"

"Of course! Though that child is willful, there's a huge level difference between her and a normal shikigami!"

Natsume's tone was also filled with excitement. After all, the tables had now turned, and Tsuchigumo was now trying to get past Hokuto, with Hokuto blocking Tsuchigumo, not letting it approach the altar. Just by the situation before them, the two sides were clearly balanced now.

...Seize the moment!

Harutora prepared to charge on foot towards the altar on the stone plaza.

There were bonfires on the four corners of the altar, spitting sparks into the pitch-black night. Torii were hung on all sides, their colors differentiated into black for the north, blue for the east, red for the south, and white for the west.

Suzuka, kneeling in front of her brother's corpse, was in the center of the altar.

There was an opportunity. Harutora leaned forward unconsciously.

But.

"...Too naive."

Suzuka murmured with a cold voice, still with her head lowered over her brother's corpse.

Immediately after, the charms covering the corpse all peeled off together, scattering in all directions.

The scene seemed like the corpse had exploded. At first glance, the charms danced through the air like confetti, but actually they attacked Harutora like a school of fish.

Natsume frantically attacked with the Peach Bow, and the wave of magical energy collided with the flurry of charms. The charms in the front were hit by the wave, dropping to the ground accordingly.

But, only the charms that bore the brunt of the wave fell to the ground. Harutora, Natsume, and Yukikaze were long since engulfed in a swarm of charms before the ones hit by the Peach Bow fell completely.

"Pwah!"

Harutora and Natsume were knocked off and pushed back from Yukikaze's body one after the other, as if they were hit by a fire hose. They fell off the horse, their bodies covered with charms. Fortunately, the charms absorbed the force of the impact, but they couldn't move because of it. Yukikaze hurriedly turned around, but its master had become a hostage, so it was helpless. Because it had also been covered with charms, it became shaken and kept its distance from the altar.

"Damn! Natsume!?"

"I, I can't, I can't get them off!"

The two of them were pressed onto the ground, and they tried to pick themselves up from the wet grass, but unfortunately the mass of charms didn't allow them to move.

The charms had originally been stuck to Suzuka's brother's corpse, but were now on Harutora and Natsume to keep them from acting to obstruct the resurrection ceremony. Harutora noticed first that the incantations on these charms seemed to be written with blood.

...Impossible!

At first glance, there were at least a thousand charms before him, and all of them were written in Suzuka's blood. You could say that these charms were the manifestation of the girl's obsession.

The thing that had been wrapped with the charms now showed itself as it laid before Suzuka.

It was a child similar to Suzuka - no, he had probably died at an age younger than Suzuka. The corpse's skin was an ashen color, but its expression was serene as if sleeping deeply.

Suzuka slowly rose, saying:

"Onmyouji, Dairenji Suzuka. I ask to offer myself to Taizan Fukun, the lord of the underworld..."

Part 2

In ancient times, Onmyouji Abe no Seimei had performed the Taizan Fukun Ritual to save the life of the Mii-dera[23] monk Chikou, offering up the life of his disciple in order to extend his life.[24]

Her only light and warmth in the dark, cold world was her brother's smile.

Her brother always showed his smile in front of her, regardless of pain, scars, or fatigue.

The siblings never had toys and never had picture books, and because they were always trimming paper into smaller pieces, they played with origami together.

Look, Suzuka, it's a new friend.

Her brother's nimble fingers folded many things, and her brother's warm smile endowed them with life. Not only the paper, but even Suzuka's life seemed to rely on her brother's smile.

That was the only magic that Suzuka valued with her deep disgust for magic.

So--

Suzuka read the incantation that was written on a scroll, giving off a tremendous magical energy.

The magical energy filled the altar on the stone plaza, spilling forth from the top of the Imperial Hill.

The surrounding aura seemed to echo the incantation, changing intensely, forming a space that one could even mistake to be a different world.

Taizan Fukun was a deity of Onmyoudou - the lord of death, regarded as the god who managed human life and death.

Now, Harutora could indeed feel 'that thing'. He couldn't hear it nor see it, but with the spirit-sensing ability he had obtained, he truly felt that thing's ' existence'.

There was a powerful strength descending to the altar.

It was an existence exceeding human understanding.

"N, Natsume! That's.....!?"

".....I don't know! But, it's definitely not a god..."

Harutora asked gingerly, and Natsume shook her head powerlessly. The altar was filled with an aura that had descended from the sky, and the two both stared intently at the altar.

The scroll Suzuka read from was blown like cotton in the breeze, lightly floating away from the girl's hands.

The flapping parchment made a soft, crinkling sound as it opened. When she read the last words, a blue flame suddenly shot out, instantly incinerating the scroll as if the heat of the aura flowing into the altar had made the scroll ignite on its own.

Then--

".....Ahh, onii-chan....."

Suzuka couldn't contain her excitement, letting out a happy voice.

The body lying on the stone plaza slowly moved.

Harutora held his breath, and Natsume's eyes widened . Suzuka's brother opened the eyelids that had not stirred in many years as the two Tsuchimikado progeny watched.

"Onii-chan!"

Hearing his sister's call, the youth slowly turned his gaze.

".....Suzuka."

The youth sat up hesitantly, and Suzuka dashed up to him, hugging him tight.

"Onii-chan, onii-chan, onii-chan, onii-chan....."

Suzuka bawled like a little girl. In comparison, Harutora's body couldn't stop shaking, and Natsume's face was livid. He could even hear her suppressing her voice, as her bloodless lips murmured: "How....."

The once-dead brother had reunited with his sister.

It should have been a touching reunion.

But Harutora felt that there was some inexplicable terror spreading through his body.

He wasn't scared, but he felt disgusted.

That feeling was probably since it was taboo, a feeling from something profane that humans were not supposed to touch upon. An alarm sounded through his entire body because of the scene before him.

But, Harutora still stared at the scene before him.

...This is.....

Forgotten soul magic.

The prodigy Tsuchimikado Yakou's - magic.

But.....

"...?"

For some reason, Harutora suddenly had a strange feeling. Immediately after, he saw the brother unexpectedly grab her thin arm out of his sister's embrace.

A surprised and confused look emerged on Suzuka's tearful face.

"O, Onii-chan?"

The youth turned his face towards his sister.

"Suzuka....."

"W, What is it?"

"It's not enough....."

The youth opened his dry eyes unblinkingly and stared intently at Suzuka. Then, he reached out his hand clumsily but surprisingly rapidly, grabbing Suzuka's shoulder.

"Onii-chan?"

Suzuka reflexively moved backwards, but the youth's fingers sank deep into the girl's shoulder, not allowing her to step back.

The youth stared hard at the panicked Suzuka, his fingers moving from her shoulder to her neck, his hands forcefully throttling the thin, choker-wearing neck.

"Not enough..... It's not enough, Suzuka....."

Veins raised from the youth's hands, his fingers sinking deep into the skin of Suzuka's neck.

Suzuka's face instantly paled.

"W, Wait, onii-chan! I'll give you..... I'll offer my life, so please wait.....!"

Suzuka struggled powerlessly. She put her hand on her brother's arm, but she couldn't pull herself free.

She had anticipated her brother's revival in her heart, but her body refused to welcome her death. Her face turned dark in a blink, her back constantly spacing.

"Wait a little more..... Please....."

She gasped painfully, a tear rolling from the corner of her eye. It wasn't a tear of joy, but shock, pain, and sadness merged into a single teardrop.

It was a tear shed by the brat that Harutora hated.

It was a tear shed by the enemy who had killed Hokuto.

"...Ugh!"

Harutora tightly clenched his teeth.

He thought in his heart that she was getting what she deserved. If that person hadn't come here, Hokuto

wouldn't have died, and they could have continued to happily visit festivals like usual, pass summer break like usual, and pass every day like usual.

Suzuka had destroyed everything.

That Suzuka who had destroyed everything was crying out of heartbreak.

You deserve it! Harutora had originally planned on continuing to watch--

".....Damn! This damn brat!"

He roared, straining to twist his restrained body. He shook his head, twisted his shoulders, put his knees against the ground, and rose in a frenzy.

As he did this, the charms that had just been stuck tightly to his body began dropping off one by one. It seemed that since the practitioner was dying, their magical energy was weakening accordingly.

"Uraaaaaah!"

A bestial roar erupted from Harutora's throat.

He racked all the strength in his body, mustering all his strength.

His clothes and the charms ripped, and even his skin tore as well. Even so, Harutora still held himself up with his arms, forcefully ripping the charms.

Just then.

"Hold your breath!"

Natsume shouted. Harutora quickly held his breath.

"Incinerate the heretic symbols, Order!"

It seemed that Natsume was also trying to rid herself of her chains however possible. She reached out her right hand that had recovered its freedom, throwing a fire-element charm towards Harutora. A raging flame shot out, and a flame swirled around the charms engulfing Harutora's body.

The searing heat stroked his skin, blowing his hair. His body wasn't burned because of it, but it instead seemed like he was blown by the summer breeze, soothing his heart. The master's magic didn't harm the shikigami, exclusively burning Suzuka's charms.

"...Alright!"

Harutora jumped out of the inferno, sprinting forward.

The pressure of the aura pervading the altar became higher and higher, and above it was the expressionless brother throttling his sister's neck and the crying sister trying to accept all of this.

The hand that Suzuka placed on the youth's arm powerlessly slipped down.

"Damn brat!"

Harutora roared, sprinting towards the youth.

The youth didn't even look at Harutora, just forcefully choking the girl's neck as if trying to squeeze out her life without leaving a drop.

Harutora was going to hit the youth and pull the two apart.

But before that, his body felt a strong heat like a fire-element charm.

The heat came from underneath his left eye, from the pentagram Natsume had drawn.

The youth's figure was reflected in his left eye, along with the aura coming from the youth's body. There was an aura that was being absorbed up into the sky. There was a connection to the heavens above the youth's head, giving off a pulse of abnormal aura.

The youth could move freely entirely because of this aura vein.

He had to cut the vein.

But, how could he do it?

...This kind of thing.....

Harutora's body twisted backwards, and he pulled off the bamboo case on his back, holding the strap in his hands.

"How should I knooowwww!"

He raised his hands high, bringing the bamboo case down on the youth's head - smashing it into that aura vein linked to the sky.

The bamboo case had Tsuchimikado ancestral tools inside it.

The Taizan Fukun Ritual was a ceremony held by the Tsuchimikado family for generations.

In that case..... Regardless of what was right, regardless of what unexpected, mistaken, or incidental things happened, it was enough if he cut that vein of aura and obstructed the ceremony.

He believed he had strangely bad luck.

But, since the Tsuchimikado family were notable Onmyouji--

Might as well see this as a celebration for tonight's birth of a new Tsuchimikado shikigami.

"Come on!"

This was the first time Harutora had prayed from his heart, and the first time he had ever so deeply wished upon his blood.

In this moment, light covered the altar.

The huge strength he had felt before was rapidly approaching him.

It was an ancient, supreme entity that Onmyouji had once named Taizan Fukun - or maybe it was the strength of a 'phenomenon' that humans could observe.

A giant, blinding aura, a dazzling god, fluctuated.

Souls shriveled.

The light flashing from the sky covered the world--

A beautiful moon hung in the sky.

A man sat in the edge of a mansion, gazing at the sky.

His hand held a cup of sake, and the sweet smell of alcohol mixed into the night.

"Yakou-sama."

In the mansion, in dim shadows that the moonlight could not reach, a voice called out softly.

"Have you still not changed your mind?"

That voice asked. The man who had been called Yakou showed a wry smile, putting his cup of sake to the side.

He returned "Yeah.", smiling as he said it.

Then, he continued with a "Sorry.", the smile disappearing from his face.

The sound of insects came to the mansion, slightly alleviating the silence between the two.

The other person quietly gazed at her moonlight master from the shadows.

Then, she also took a sitting posture, slowly lowering her head.

"I will wait until stones become dust, because I am - your shikigami."

The insects didn't stop, as if it were the last brilliant orchestra of their lives.

The sound of the approaching end of summer.

...Huh?

It seems like I saw something.

No, it seems like I saw someone.

It was an extremely distant past carved in Harutora's heart.

He had never seen that scene, but he truly remembered it.

His heart jumped intensely, and his brain cells sparked , electricity running through his body.

That thing's existence surpassed the concept of time that Harutora knew. In 'that moment', Tsuchimikado Harutora's sixteen-year-old self blurred momentarily, flying instantaneously, and then--

"Ban, Un, Taraku, Kiriku, Aku! Connect the five elements, Order!"

Natsume yelled loudly.

Just as Harutora's consciousness waned, five charms floated down from above his head. Light connected the charms, drawing out a brilliant pentagram in midair, forming a rigid wall that blocked the light pouring down and pulling Harutora's consciousness back to reality.

"......Ah."

Coming to his senses, Harutora was standing in the center of the altar, holding the strap of the bamboo case in his hand. Suzuka had lost consciousness, but Suzuka's brother was lying by his feet motionless.

Just then, Natsume jumped at him from the side.

She knocked Harutora over, her back to the air, smothering her childhood friend's head in her chest.

"N, Natsume?"

"Don't look! Your soul will be taken away!"

Natsume desperately cried.

The wall formed by the pentagram cut off the altar from that 'other world', but it couldn't stop the strong ripples. Harutora had no way of imagining what was above him right now or what it was doing. His soul felt choked - it was Natsume's soft presence that let him slightly calm down.

That moment seemed like an eternity.

In this eternal moment, the two of them relied on holding each other’s bodies to support them.

This was the only thing the young Onmyouji and the new shikigami could do before a god.

When Harutora noticed, the aura's pressure had already disappeared.

He opened his closed eyes, blinking from the ground where he lay after Natsume had knocked him over.

Natsume still held Harutora's head in her chest, and Harutora looked around from the gaps between her arms .

The pentagram wall had already vanished, and the feeling of the strange world was no longer there. All that was before him was an ancient stone plaza set on a hilltop.

Harutora looked at Natsume. She lay on the ground, at a loss. Once she noticed Harutora's gaze, she quickly noticed that she was still hugging her childhood friend's head, and hurriedly let go.

The fragrance that surrounded Harutora floated away, dissipating into the air.

"......Is it over?"

"Is..... Is it?"

Harutora and Natsume asked each other, both of them clearly a bit helpless.

Next to them, Suzuka slowly got up, bringing them a shock.

But.

"...Yukikaze!?"

Yukikaze who had been far from the altar had come forth, the Protection Sword in its mouth. It seemed like it had run out to find the sword in order to save its master. Harutora finally came to his senses at that moment.

Yukikaze shook its head, dropping the Protection Sword, and Harutora quickly got up and took the sword upon looking around.

He pointed the sword at Suzuka who sat on the ground, about to tell her to give up resisting, when--

"......Why?"

Suzuka murmured to herself, letting out an empty voice.

Harutora relaxed the strength in his hand and the tip of the sword dropped powerlessly.

Suzuka was no longer Harutora's enemy. Harutora let the sword down, silently gazing at the girl.

He suddenly felt something near his head, and saw Hokuto emerge in midair as soon as he looked up.

What happened with the surprising thing just now? ... Hokuto looked at Harutora with that kind of confusion and incomprehension. What a leisurely thing. Harutora's lips curved in a smile.

He turned around, seeing that Tsuchigumo wasn't moving at all, and it didn't seem like it had damaged Hokuto either. He guessed that maybe Suzuka's magical energy had been drained to exhaustion, or maybe Tsuchigumo had been completely purified by Taizan Fukun.

Suzuka sobbed quietly, holding her brother's motionless body. She whimpered clearly with her head in her brother's chest.

Harutora looked back at Natsume with a bitter face. After her and Harutora's gazes crossed, he silently turned around as if remembering something.

With nowhere to vent his emotions, Harutora looked up at the sky.

The moon hung high in the clear night sky.

Part 3

When Harutora turned his phone on and contacted Touji, Touji replied with an abnormally calm tone. That calm yet agitated tone was the best proof that Touji was angry. Harutora apologized and explained the general situation.

When Touji heard the news of Hokuto's death, he was clearly a bit shocked. Noticing his good friend stunned and unable to speak, Harutora couldn't help but feel pained along with him.

After a relatively long silence--

'.....Really?'

Touji normally would never confirm like this. Harutora hoarsely said "yeah".

"Hey, Touji. You couldn't have known already, right? She's, well....."

'The fact that she's not human?'

"....."

Harutora closed his mouth.

'I actually wasn't sure.' Touji replied honestly. 'I never checked with her, and more importantly, she was Hokuto regardless of what she was.'

"Touji....."

Harutora clenched his teeth upon hearing that last sentence. It seemed like that had alleviated the void brought by Hokuto's death a bit.

'I'll go over there with the Mystical Investigators in a while, the aid is about to arrive. Wait there for a little longer.'

".....Got it. Touji..."

'What?'

"Thanks." On the other side of the phone, Touji hmphed lightly, then hung up. He was still calm and strong like always. Harutora exhaled like he was going to breath out his entire body, closing the phone.

After Harutora told her the news about contacting the Mystical Investigators, Natsume nodded silently.

The two of them walked down the altar on the stone plaza, standing on the grass.

Suzuka was still by the altar. She had sat beside her brother's collapsed body hugging her knees for the whole time. She clearly didn't have any intent of resisting, just disregarding everything and anything they said.

Natsume had advocated using magic to bind her, but Harutora maintained the opposite opinion, believing that they should first let her have some quiet time to herself. Actually, if Suzuka got serious - even though she looked like her spiritual power was depleted - Natsume wasn't sure if she could succeed in binding her. In the end, they decided to go by Harutora's opinion, staying nearby and watching for the time being.

".....Then, I'm counting on you from now on."

"Yes, I know. But I really don't think I can explain clearly."

"It's the same even if I explain. People who weren't here won't understand regardless of how detailed the explanation is."

Harutora deeply agreed with Natsume's words. To be honest, even Harutora and Natsume who had actually experienced the events weren't very clear on what had happened back then.

Explained using 'General Onmyoudou', the situation was that the soul suspected to be Suzuka's brother's was actually a wandering spirit and Taizan Fukun was a special type of spiritual disaster. Just like something worshipped in the past like lightning or Mount Fuji, but which now was just a plain electric phenomenon or a national park. Though they were the same things, peoples' impressions were different. The difference between the past and the present might be the 'prayer' that Natsume had spoken so sincerely about.

But, only Harutora would be welcoming the Mystical Investigators' inspection. Natsume would leave the Imperial Hill before the Mystical Investigators arrived.

When asked for the reason, she just replied briefly: '..... It's a family tradition.' She hung her head, as if to hide the embarrassment on her face, without explaining any further.

Honestly, Harutora was a bit dissatisfied inside, but right now he was Natsume's shikigami, and he had to obey his master's orders. More importantly, he couldn't say any more since that was what the tradition dictated.

As far as Harutora knew, there was only one branch family tradition, but the Tsuchimikado main family seemed to have quite a few complex traditions and customs that had to be obeyed. Come to think about it, when they had reunited on the bridge before, Natsume had also said that she was bothered by a tradition.

"Whatever. It'll be fine if I just convince myself that it's something that I don't know about."

".....Sorry."

Natsume hung her head, seeming she was sincerely apologetic. Harutora wryly said the words 'It's alright', leisurely looking into the night sky.

The night sky was clear and cloudless.

A moist humidity lingered in the night sky, soaking into the skin and not feeling the least bit hot.

".....Everything's over."

"Yeah."

Upon hearing the thoughts leaking from Harutora's mouth, Natsume next to him also expressed her agreement.

These matters had left behind a sad ending, but it had finally ended.

Harutora took out the shikigami charm that had formed Hokuto from his pants pocket. He still felt depressed, but his sad emotions had reduced slightly.

".....Could I see that for a bit?"

Natsume spoke, and Harutora couldn't help but be surprised.

"Can you fix it?"

He gave her the charm, asking with a sliver of hope. But, Natsume shook her head emotionlessly.

"I'm sorry, this shikigami charm no longer has any aura in it, and with such serious damage, it cannot be repaired."

As expected - Harutora's shoulders drooped in loneliness.

It had originally been an old charm with traces of many repairs on it. Now, the charm was not only damaged, but stained with rainwater and mud, dilapidated. Even an outsider could tell that this shikigami charm could no longer be fixed.

But, Natsume held the dilapidated shikigami charm extremely gingerly, maybe out of respect for Harutora's good friend, but Harutora felt somewhat strangely that even her gaze was tender, like she was looking at a child.

"That person..... Hokuto, is she dead? Or do shikigami not have what we call life?" Harutora couldn't help but ask, seeing Natsume's look.

Actually, he was very scared of finding the answer to that question. He really didn't want anything to deny or interfere with the relationship between him and Hokuto.

But, Natsume's reply greatly exceeded his expectations .

"Harutora-kun, the person called Hokuto should still be alive."

"......Huh?"

He didn't understand for a while. Natsume saw Harutora's stunned look and changed her wording.

"More accurately, the practitioner who used the identity of this shikigami Hokuto to communicate with you still lives somewhere right now. Judging from that person's magic, this shikigami is controlled by the practitioner directly, so in other words, this shape is a shikigami but just a 'container'. Someone out there somewhere controlled this container's actions, and her true personality is elsewhere."

"....."

Harutora opened his mouth wide, unable to speak for a long time.

Hokuto was a shikigami controlled directly by a practitioner, or in other words, Hokuto's body was a

shikigami but her heart belonged to the practitioner. It had all been the practitioner acting and speaking through that body.

...That person..... that person still lived somewhere?

But, in that case a new question emerged.

"Why? Why did Hokuto - that practitioner do something like this?"

"I, I don't know that, but she definitely had some reason."

Harutora couldn't fathom Natsume's reply.

"Reason? I don't understand why she wanted to interact with me. We didn't do anything special, just played together ordinarily..... Only talked about boring nonsense....."

"Didn't I say I didn't know? But I think Harutora-kun definitely knows better than I do."

"Me? Why? I didn't even know she was a shikigami..... "

"But, weren't you good friends?"

Natsume's words made Harutora stop speaking for some time. He pursed his lips, showing a troubled appearance.

I lied to you, I'm sorry for always deceiving you.

He thought of Hokuto's face before her deathbed. Thinking carefully, strange things had happened one after another since they met, but even so, Hokuto had stayed his good friend.

Harutora was ashamed of himself, having never even imagined that there was some hidden secret behind Hokuto. But regardless of what secret hid inside her, Hokuto was Hokuto and that wouldn't change. Hokuto was his good friend - that was definitely not wrong.

She still lived. There was nothing happier than that.

"Some day....."

"Huh?"

"Some day, will she show up in front of me?"

Harutora scratched his nose, smiling.

For a brief moment, Natsume showed a hard-to-describe complex look.

But.

"...Yeah, definitely."

After saying that, she lightly gave the charm back to Harutora.

After Touji notified him by text message that the aid had arrived, Natsume left Harutora, leaving the altar on Yukikaze.

".....You really are an idiot."

Suzuka suddenly opened her mouth after the white horse vanished, galloping into the night. Harutora's heart leaped in surprise.

"Ah, you..... You're awake?"

".....I was never asleep."

Suzuka continued hugging her knees, looking at Harutora. Half of her small face was behind her knees, and he couldn't see her expression at all.

".....Aren't you a little bit too careless? You know, I could kill you easily."

Her voice was appallingly dull. Harutora frowned, not running away, but rather turning around to face Suzuka.

"You want to kill me and run away?"

"....."

"You wouldn't do that, right?"

".....What do you base that on?"

"I don't feel any killing intent."

"....."

"Okay, I lied. I can't sense anything like killing intent, I just simply feel that way."

Harutora replied honestly. He didn't believe Suzuka would sink to murder at the end, and though he had no proof, it was a sort of intuition.

Harutora's reply made Suzuka bury her face deeper in her knees.

".....Why did you save me?"

"Save - when you were being choked?"

"....."

"I was just stopping the ceremony from going on, I didn't do it deliberately to save you.[25] After all, I'm also a member of the Tsuchimikado family right now."

".....Even though I killed her?"

'Her', meaning Hokuto. Harutora's body trembled slightly after Suzuka's clear question, but he still slowly and deliberately relaxed his slightly tensed body.

".....I thought about just watching at one point."

He breathed deeply and exhaled, slowly speaking when his voice no longer shook.

"But thinking carefully, I was wrong. Hokuto wasn't killed by you, she saved me."

If he hadn't heard Natsume's explanation, maybe he couldn't have replied like this. These were Harutora's current feelings, and maybe someone would laugh at his selfish thoughts - but what was wrong with being selfish if he could stop hating himself with it and resolve everything calmly? Hokuto would definitely understand.

"She really was a great friend, right?"

".....Bunch of fools."

Suzuka muttered.

Then, she didn't look at Harutora any more, drooping her head and burying it deeply behind her knees.

Short, weak sobs sounded, and Harutora listened silently.

But, there was just one thing he had to say.

".....Listen up, remember to give your brother a proper burial."

The sound of sobbing increased, no longer hidden, and faint whimpers reached his ears.

She softly responded amidst her sobs:

".....Yeah."

Harutora indeed heard it.

Suzuka's tears didn't stop.

Touji and the others arrived half an hour later.

Part 4

The closing of the case was announced the very next day after the Onmyou Agency arrested Suzuka.

But even with that broadcast, Suzuka's name still wasn't made public.

Harutora's parents returned home from Tokyo the following morning.

At that time, Harutora was still being questioned by the Mystical Investigators. In the end, he was detained for the entire night.

This matter reached his parents' ears. When they came to take Harutora home, they quickly and indiscriminately scolded him fiercely. However, when they saw the pentagram on their son's cheek, their faces changed and they went speechless out of surprise, only able to gape quietly.

In the end, how carefully had his parents guarded him while growing up during the past years?

Harutora only learned the answer to that question much, much later.

Harutora and Touji met the following afternoon.

He explained everything in detail and laid it all out on the table, everything regarding Hokuto's death, himself becoming Natsume's shikigami, and the battle and events on the Imperial Hill altar.

Of course, he also talked about the remark Natsume had made about Hokuto.

The Hokuto that the two of them knew had disappeared, but 'that person' still lived.

Touji asked a few questions in between, grasping the cause and effect of Harutora's words. His attitude was even more attentive than usual.

"......I see, so I was wrong after all." After listening to all of Harutora's words, he murmured some words quietly.

"Wrong? What were you wrong about?"

Touji's sudden words led Harutora to ask about them.

"I also thought a lot after things happened." Touji shrugged his shoulders, starting with an introduction. "... ...Yakou reincarnated, no, let's assume that he reincarnated."

"Yeah."

"Then where did his shikigami go?"

"Yakou's shikigami? Ah, are you talking about the branch family person?"

In that case, Touji had also mentioned those things before the festival.

But.

"......Yeah, I guess. Yakou should have had numerous shikigami at the time, including from the branch family. I was just thinking, we don't know what happened to those shikigami after Yakou reincarnated."

"Oh..... so?"

"When I heard that Hokuto was a shikigami, I believed that she was one of them."

Harutora's mouth gaped when Touji said all of that.

"W, Wait a second! You couldn't have believed Hokuto was Yakou's shikigami, right?"

Harutora's eyes widened with a stunned expression. Touji just shrugged his shoulders, looking quite calm.

"It was just a speculation..... Judging by the words of that main family successor, it seems like I guessed wrong . A directly manipulated shikigami is like a remote control toy, right? Since it's a toy that needs its controller, it's impossible for Hokuto to have been Yakou's shikigami."

"O, Of course. How could she have such an important role."

"In that case, the problem of what happened to Yakou's shikigami still hasn't been resolved."

"Who knows about that kind of thing! .....After all, its master died, so it should have died as well - or maybe it was released from its bindings, and it went who knows where to live its own free and unfettered life?"

He was always saying that kind of confusing and incomprehensible thing. Harutora exhaled deeply, muttering a few words. Touji heard him, and an unfathomable smile emerged on his face.

".....Maybe they're still looking for their master."

".....So? Now they'll turn to Natsume? What unfortunate things."

He replied indifferently, unable to keep from grinning along with Touji. This was the first time he had shown a smile after telling Touji about what happened.

Touji leaned back in his chair, lightly shrugging his shoulders.

"That mysterious girl was a mystery to the very end."

His tone was as harsh as usual, but it sounded like there were a few differences from before.

The sound of cicadas rose from somewhere.

The summer days were still scorching, but maybe the summer days of the three people Harutora, Touji, and Hokuto had ended here.

The two of them were silent for a long time, watching the end of the summer sun.

Afterwards, in order to welcome the coming new season, they switched to a different topic.

Time slowly passed.

When the short summer vacation ended, Natsume would return to Tokyo.

The next day, Harutora told his parents that he wanted to leave his current high school and leave to study in the Onmyou Academy.

Part 5

"......She's too slow, how long does that Natsume plan on making me wait....."

Harutora faced the bustling group of people who had come to Tokyo, his hand supporting a sports bag and a large backpack on his back as he bitterly stood by the road.

The Onmyou Academy was in the center of three large streets of Shibuya, and Harutora was waiting for Natsume at the entrance to Shibuya Station.

After things had ended, Harutora and Natsume had sent each other several text messages and had also talked directly on the phone. Anyhow, Harutora was now Natsume's shikigami, and the pentagram Natsume had marked on his face was still on his left cheek, like a tattoo .

"Harutora, listen up, you need to go to Tokyo as soon as possible, since a shikigami must be by their master at all times."

Natsume had instructed him with this once over the phone. Her tone was strong, maybe to cover her shyness - Harutora thought it would be good if that were true. He felt faintly like he wasn't being treated like a shikigami, but like an attendant or servant instead.

But.

"......I came here in the end."

When he had told his parents about entering the Onmyou Academy face-to-face, they hadn't opposed him . After that, he had been busy wrapping things up. He had to apply to leave school during the summer vacation , as well as take the transfer admissions exam for the Onmyou Academy. There hadn't been any students transferring recently, and Harutora didn't know whether it was because of the Tsuchimikado name - in any case, he no longer had any reason to wonder - working behind the scenes, or maybe because he had been credited with the event involving Dairenji Suzuka.

But, in any case, Harutora didn't care about the story behind it.

He was a shikigami, and he just had to do what he could to help Natsume.

August 31.

The seemingly endless yet brief summer vacation ended just like that.

"......She's way too slow, what is Natsume doing....."

He had sent a text upon reaching Shibuya Station, telling Natsume that he had already arrived. A whole hour had already passed since then, and people came and went, but he hadn't seen Natsume. Harutora sighed, looking at the sky.

The sun was almost completely set, and the summer sun was swapping its colors into the night sky, which was painted a pure indigo.

The instant the sun fell under the horizon, in the short magical moment when the light hadn't completely vanished. The day's colors were particularly bright, and just watching it made his negative feelings completely vanish. For some reason, a smile emerged on Harutora's face--

"Bakatora!"

At the start, he thought it was a hallucination.

His vision was naturally led by the sound, and he saw someone running straight towards him. That person was particularly conspicuous among the group of people, not only because of her beautiful appearance, but also because the clothes she wore were unique.

That person wore the Onmyou Academy uniform, dressed fully in black.

But--

"I, It's been a while, even though it's only been two weeks..... Did you wait long? I was also..... a bit unsure about what to do, but, well, I'm okay now, I've already gathered my resolve."

An Onmyou Academy student stood in front of the dumbstruck Harutora, trying her best but unable to hide her embarrassment and tension, her entire face blushing red.

It was Harutora's childhood friend.

But she was wearing a male uniform, and her speech was also just like a boy's - as if she were a child.[26]

Her black, long hair wasn't spread behind her back like usual, but was tied in a bunch, drooping over her shoulder to the front of her chest.

A pink ribbon tied up her hair, like a case of deja vu.

Harutora was stunned.

".....Natsume, what are you doing?"

"W, What do you mean by that? I came to find you!"

".....What's up with your speech?"

"What do you mean, of course it's..... Huh? ...Wait, wait a minute, did Aunt and Uncle not tell you!?"

Tying up her hair, and wearing a male uniform - a girl disguised in male clothing, Natsume suddenly flailed her hands, showing her inherent personality. Harutora nodded blankly, and she straightened her body, moving her face near Harutora's ear.

Her attitude changed, returning to the tone Harutora was familiar with to say:

"'The Tsuchimikado Heir must be as a male when in the outside world.' It's a main family tradition! Harutora, did you really hear nothing at all about it?"

"I didn't."

"Why is that!? I asked Aunt and Uncle to explain things clearly to you beforehand!"

"......I, I see. I think..... they probably forgot."

There was a high chance that they had forgotten, and even if they hadn't, he had really been busy to death these few days, with no free time at all.

Harutora spoke awkwardly, and Natsume's face blushed instantly.

It seemed, as Harutora learned afterwards, that her original plan was for Harutora to cooperate with the gender-disguised Natsume. As she told him, she had clearly been troubled, her whole body stiff.

Harutora finally understood, after everything, why Natsume hadn't wanted him to say her name. It was because 'Tsuchimikado Natsume' was a 'male' to outsiders. This was a pedantic family tradition, but Harutora who had actually become a shikigami had no right to question it.

The two childhood friends looked at each other, silent.

Harutora was uneasy, and Natsume's mouth trembled lightly like she felt deeply ashamed, ready to dig a hole for herself to crawl into. It seemed that she really wasn't good at adapting to changes.

"...A, Anyway! That's how things are, so you better properly cooperate, Harutora! Got it? Don't forget, you're my shikigami, and you have to listen to my orders, understood? If you get it..." Natsume nervously talked loudly, panic-stricken to the very end.

Harutora leisurely replied with an 'okay'. Natsume pursed her lips, her face still red.

"I understand. Sorry Natsume, for troubling you again. "

"....."

He replied calmly, and Natsume listened quietly.

Afterwards, she asked to confirm in a cautious tone:

"Do you really understand?'

"Didn't I say so?"

"......Do you understand everything?"

"I understand everything."

Natsume gazed at Harutora, and Harutora looked back and Natsume. There was an unspoken agreement between them, an unspoken joy at their 'reunion'.

Natsume's black eyes reflected the figure of her childhood friend.

"......I'm sorry."

"Huh?"

"......I lied to you. I'm sorry for always deceiving you."

She lowered her head and apologized quietly. The ribbon tied in her black hair swayed gently with her movements.

"In the beginning..... I was just practicing, practicing a new magic and masculine words and actions. One time, I thought of telling the truth, but Harutora, you told me ' you don't need to say anything', and so I didn't say anything extra. I was scared that I would become separated from Harutora again if I said it....."

Natsume lightly bit her lip.

Harutora smiled.

"You're too dramatic, you don't need to apologize about that kind of thing."

"Harutora....."

Natsume raised her head, a relieved look emerging on her face. Her face was dyed with a redness different from before as she stared warmly into Harutora' eyes.

"It's not like you lied to me on purpose, right? My mom and dad just forgot to tell me about it, and I

wouldn't separate from you just because you're disguised as a guy." Harutora spoke brightly.

"....."

Natsume blinked in surprise.

"......Huh?"

Harutora didn't notice Natsume's reaction, continuing to say:

"But, when did I tell you 'you don't need to say anything'? Did I say that to you before?"

"....."

Confusion momentarily flashed across Natsume's serious expression, and when she noticed that the two of them were obviously talking about different things, her heart became even more tangled, and she suddenly became flustered.

"......Harutora, could it be that you haven't noticed?"

She deliberately fiddled with her tied hair, touching the ribbon.

Harutora blankly asked: "What?"

"Didn't you say you understood everything?"

"Isn't it just the family tradition? Can't do anything about it, since you're so serious after all."

"....."

Harutora responded showing a tolerant attitude, with a helpless demeanor.

The expression on Natsume's face slowly calmed down.

"......Liar."

"What? Why?"

"You big liar! Why are you always like this! You don't understand anything, stop joking around, Bakatora!"

"Huh, wait, what? Why are you mad all of a sudden?"

Natsume flailed her fists, thumping Harutora with a look that seemed like she was about to cry rather than being angry. The pedestrians walking by looked at the

two with strange looks, but she didn't stop, thumping the luggage-carrying Harutora with fist after fist.

Just then.

"......So that's how it was. I really can't stand you two."

A youth with a duffel bag slung over his shoulder showed up in front of them. That person had stood far away, watching everything that had just happened, and showed a look of astonishment from the depths of his heart.

Natsume's eyes opened wide in surprise upon seeing the youth.

But Harutora opened his mouth to say:

"Hey, Touji. Did you finish everything with your friends here?"

"I didn't finish anything, I was just saying hello and telling them I was back in Tokyo. But I really never thought that you would still be in front of the station."

Upon saying this, Touji glanced at Natsume with a sharp gaze.

Harutora hurriedly explained;

"Ah, this is the main family prodigy that I always mentioned, Tsuchimikado Natsume. Don't make a mistake since she's dressed like this, she's actually a girl. She has to pretend to be a guy because of family traditions, so please don't tell other people. Then, Natsume, this is my friend--"

"......Why is Touji here?"

Natsume whispered, stunned. Harutora didn't understand.

"Did I talk about Touji? You're pretty attentive. He's Ato Touji, he's always got that bandanna on his head, it's his trademark - Guwah!"

Before Harutora had finished speaking, Natsume pulled him hard.

She grabbed on to Harutora's chest with two hands that didn't stop shaking.

"I'm asking you, why is he here?"

"Uh, well, he's also entering the Onmyou Academy with me..... Didn't I say before?"

"I never heard about that! And he's going to enter the Onmyou Academy? How can that be! Isn't Touji an outsider!?"

Harutora didn't have a clue about Natsume's vexation and could only stare with his eyes wide.

Touji who leisurely and calmly watched the two opened his mouth and said:

"I was a spirit-seer all along."

Natsume went speechless for a while, staring blankly at Touji.

Touji just shrugged his shoulders with a casual appearance.

"It's a side affect from being involved in a spiritual disaster before. I'm still receiving treatment at an Onmyouji clinic even now. I plan on taking advantage of this opportunity to become an Onmyouji, so I can look after myself in the future."

Natsume's mouth gaped in surprise.

"......All along? Wait, so you mean.....?"

Natsume asked gingerly, and Touji returned an evil look and smile.

"I can tell humans from shikigami pretty well, and in particular it becomes easier the more time I spend with them. But let's not talk about that. Nice to meet you, Natsume. That ribbon really suits you."

"....."

Natsume's lips slightly trembled, and her hand lifelessly released Harutora's chest.

Harutora was befuddled by her reaction.

"Uh..... Did something happen?'

Hearing Harutora's clueless response, Natsume wailed , but Touji shook his head helplessly.

"Harutora."

"What?'

"The nickname Bakatora is very suitable for you."

After Touji said this, Natsume shouted shrilly and with a red face as if she couldn't take any more:

"Whatever! Bakatora and you other person, come with me. For your information, you'll be my kouhai in the Onmyou Academy, so you better be prepared!"

After dropping those words, she turned around, slinging her hair over her back and striding into the crowd of people.

Harutora's eyes were wide.

"......What's up with her? Sorry Touji, she's usually not like this."

"No, she's usually like that."

Touji smiled, quickly following Natsume.

Harutora's brain was mixed up to the limit.

Not only Natsume, even Touji was being very strange, and it seemed like he was even sort of excited. Though he didn't get what was going on, he felt that he was

being left behind, and it wasn't just in terms of location, but also in terms of the general atmosphere.

He felt distraught, but if he got left behind in this kind of place, there would be a good chance that he who was unfamiliar to the area would get lost. Harutora picked up his luggage again, chasing after the vanishing figures of the two.

"Hey! Natsume, Touji, you're hiding something from me, right? You're hiding something from me!"

Every time he spoke from behind, Natsume walked faster, and the ribbon bobbing with her hair swayed left and right accordingly.

Upon seeing the ribbon, Harutora felt like something flashed through his mind.

--Huh?

That thing was fleeting. Harutora pondered it as he chased hard after Natsume and Touji.

The master's ribbon lightly swayed, guiding the new shikigami through the crowd of people.

The history of the Tsuchimikado began turning again.

Afterword

What do all of you associate "breeze" with?

Very old? Very boring? Not so sure why, but it just feels like it's bad taste?

In fact this author, during his time as a student, already had these ideas. Even while knowing that there are still feelings like "No, wait, this thing, is it really nice? " at many times—but I still wrote of an Onmyouji as the protagonist, which is also a "breezy" kind of story.

To put it in words, with modern society as the stage, mainly about curses and spells, an Onmyoji story!

"Tokyo Ravens", with its goal as a "cool breeze" opens.

Because of these, I am Azano Kouhei. Nice to meet you . Or maybe, I've had you guys wait, something like that? My previous series "Black Blood Brothers" has been a year till now. While waiting, I've always wanted to devote to everyone an interesting story. Firstly serving " Shaman*Clan" this piece of work, make everyone happy, what do you guys feel? This time the hero Harutora, in this author's team of heroes, is an uncommon dense idiot type. In spell battles he is an idiot, these make one feel

really suicidal (lol), and please support this. By the way, he is also active in a "Dragon Magazine" serialization. There tells the stories after Harutora becomes an Onmyo Prep student, if possible please take a look.

Also, this "Tokyo Ravens". Actually on Kadokawa Shoten's "Monthly Shonen Ace" there's a serialized manga version of this, the serialization is started at the same time! The manga artist doing it is Suzumi Atsushi. Be sure to appreciate those over there!

Lastly, I want to thank the person in-charge of illustrations Sumihei-sensei, many thanks for depicting the overwhelming charm of Harutora and Natsume! The roles and detailed indications correspond accurately, thank you so much!

Keiti-sensei. Since the planning started it has been a long time, please take care of me in the future!

Also, readers. Although this book is called Raven, but actually it's still an immature nestling, in the process of flying towards the sky, if you guys can be together with this author in watching over it then that would be too great.

The second volume is finally the school one. Do stay tuned!

April 2010 Azano Kouhei

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Hokuto is talking endlessly by herself.
2. ↑ Hokuto has a brain freeze.
3. ↑ Parade of a Hundred Demons
4. ↑ An analog of the Japanese text. May not accurately describe the meanings of these Japanese words.
5. ↑ A type of flower
6. ↑ The signature red gates of Japanese shrines
7. ↑ Small wooden plaques where Shinto worshippers write their wishes.
8. ↑ A reference to Touji's words about loving peace in the previous chapter.
9. ↑ Japanese pronouns at work here. No really good English translation.
10. ↑ The bird.
11. ↑ A Hindu mythological being. More about Asuras
12. ↑ Earth spider.
13. ↑ Actually called the 'Armored Demon Soldier', but this sounds better.
14. ↑ Sanskrit buddhist mantra.
15. ↑ A five-pointed star.
16. ↑ About 18.5 square meters.
17. ↑ [1]
18. ↑ A Japanese sacred plant. [2]

19. ↑ This is a metaphor. Nothing kinky.
20. ↑ Hokuto is 北, and the Big Dipper is (Hokuto Shichisei).
21. ↑ Poor translation. 'Order' isn't really a direct translation in the first place.
22. ↑ Okay, someone please have a better SFX than this
23. ↑ A temple at the foot of Mount Hiei.
24. ↑ Missing the name of the disciple, which is still untranslated.
25. ↑ Tsundere Harutora? :P
26. ↑ Japanese males speak with different pronouns from females. Or something like that.